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approved version of the following dissertation:**

**19<sup>th</sup> Century Plantation Counter-Discourses in Juan Francisco**

**Manzano, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido), and**

**Eleuterio Derkes**

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Manzano, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido), and  
Eleuterio Derkes**

**by**

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

I tenderly dedicate this dissertation to my wife: Deanna Oleen and our three children Kayson, Bailey and Tyler; and to my mother Marsha Oleen; and my siblings and best friends Robert Adam Grizz Oleen and Jennifer Oleen Rook. Also, I dedicate this to the memory of my father Alan Whiting Oleen. My deepest regret is that he did not live to live to see its completion.

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graduate student experience is one of blood, sweat, and tears – only we will be able to understand just how literal this statement has been for our family. Without their faith in me and sacrifices for me, this would not have been possible, and it will never be forgotten.

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My purpose in writing this dissertation is to re-evaluate the works of three influential Spanish-Caribbean authors who seem to be remembered more as exceptional historical characters rather than for their literature itself. Although often considered to be important contributors to the Spanish-Caribbean literary canon, these writers have also suffered a measure of marginalization as scholars have relegated them to the status of discursive subjects rather than evaluate them as authorial agents. As a consequence, the majority of their works have not been fully recognized as important factors in nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty first century literary production. I show how in their writings – many of which have been misunderstood, under-evaluated, and/or forgotten altogether – these



writers narrated their own precarious situations and lifted their voice in protest against slavery, racism and economic oppression at a time when the dominant discourses and heavy-handed controls of the Spanish colonial government strictly forbid them to do so.

These authors are Juan Francisco Manzano, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido) and Eleuterio Derkes. Because these authors lived in Cuba (Manzano and Plácido) and Puerto Rico (Derkes) as colonial subjects underneath the oppressive structures of their respective plantation and *hacienda* economies based on sugar production and slave labor, they experienced difficult colonial conditions and as such are able to narrate this life through a unique perspective that other writers associated with the dominant discourses of the time could not. While these brands of hegemony were indeed forced upon them as writers and artists, it did not stop them from narrating and communicating their unique Spanish Caribbean perspective. I show how these authors, as marginalized figures of nineteenth century plantation society, engineered their own discourses around these hegemonic institutions – writing between the lines of hegemony and concurrent with it at the same time – in order to create an alternative image of nineteenth century Spanish Caribbean society that requires further critical consideration and perspective.

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## Introduction: Nineteenth Century Latin American Discourse and the Spanish Caribbean: Cuba and Puerto Rico

Seamos realistas: el Atlántico es hoy el Atlántico (con todas sus ciudades portuarias) porque alguna vez fue producto de la cópula de Europa [. . .] con las costas del Caribe; el Atlántico es hoy el Atlántico – el ombligo del capitalismo – porque Europa, en su laboratorio mercantilista, concibió el proyecto de inseminar la matriz caribeña con la sangre de África. [. . .] No obstante, el hecho de haber parido un océano de tanto prestigio universal no es la única razón por la cual el Caribe es un mar importante. [. . .] En realidad, la historia del Caribe es uno de los hilos principales de la historia del capitalismo. – Antonio Benítez Rojo

Sí, mucho se ha dicho sobre el tema del negro o de “lo negro” [. . .] Volúmenes extensos, inacabables bibliografías sobre la discusión de cómo se construye el *sujeto* del negro a través de la poesía, la narrativa, y el teatro, que enfatizan en aquellos textos que nacen de plumas de escritores blancos y su visión de lo que es el hombre o la mujer negra en el momento que observan, como si tratar de construir el *sujeto* negro desde la visión del blanco, hablara algo de la visión que tiene el negro de sí mismo. Esto nos sirve, pero menos que a medias. – Roberto Ramos-Perea

The nineteenth century in Latin America was a time of great societal change and political turmoil. On the heels of the United States and Haiti, who in 1776 and 1804 respectively broke free from their European colonial moorings through two costly and bloody revolutions, one by one the colonies of the Spanish empire began to seek their own independence as well through the same

revolutionary processes. Again, these revolutions were paid for through significant losses of human life, territory and monetary capital. As Spain's grip on Latin America weakened and eventually slipped on its continental holdings altogether, its grasp tightened on the colonies it still could control in the Caribbean: Cuba and Puerto Rico. Thus, the history of these two island nations in the nineteenth century is one of tight governmental control over its populations in an effort to both prevent revolution and maintain its economic system. Colonial subjects on these islands lived lives in constant interdiction, especially those whose skin color did not match that of the Spanish "majority" – an ironic term in and of itself as the number of people of color on these two islands greatly outnumbered the whites (Miller 52). For these Afro-Cuban and Afro-Puerto Rican individuals, life was certainly more complicated if not more difficult in most cases. For those individuals of color who chose to write as a profession, these complications became extremely oppressive. As such, most of the literature that talked about blacks or mulattoes and the struggles they faced were written by privileged, white writers and critics, whose intentions may or may not have been favorable to the populations of color surrounding them. As racism and institutional censorship prevailed from within the colonial governments of both nations, the space for black writers was very narrow and highly selective. Though they were certainly not the only ones, three writers of African heritage from Cuba and Puerto Rico who individually stood up to this literary and intellectual oppression still stand out today as memorable and significant. They are: from

Cuba – Juan Francisco Manzano and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido) and from Puerto Rico – Eleuterio Derkes. As individual colonial subjects they faced a number of different challenges and hardships, but as writers they faced many more that would not only affect their own lives, but shaped the nature of their texts as well.

In order for each of these authors to gain recognition as writers, they each had to appropriate in their writing, the dominant controlling discourses of the day. For Manzano and Plácido this was a white reformist and anti-slavery discourse that neither could fully access due to their race and social status. For Derkes, this was also a white discourse controlled by the *hacendado* class of which he could not be a part because of the color of his skin. So just like Manzano and Plácido, his access to this discourse was limited as he could not fully appropriate it either. For each of these three authors, this dominant discourse was dictated in great part by the economic system under which they lived and by the rigid controls the Spanish colonial authorities in Cuba and Puerto Rico put in place to ensure that system's success. Along with this control came powerful societal structures of race and class that oppressed, controlled and marginalized each one of these authors. Before that they were always first colonial subjects and were relegated to a secondary and sometimes tertiary status as citizens due to their race and social status. In order to write and for their texts to be recognized and remembered, they first had to overcome the stigmas placed upon them by the hegemonic systems that controlled them.

Because of this lack of ability to completely fulfill the hegemonic expectations of these dominant controlling discourses, critics of Manzano, Plácido and Derkes have often under-evaluated or misjudged their texts and Manzano, Plácido and Derkes themselves have at times been remembered more for their contributions as historical subjects and as such, have suffered a measure of marginalization as writers. For Manzano, this meant he would be remembered more as a slave who learned how to write by copying his master's handwriting and wrote his autobiography in exchange for his freedom, than as the serious poet and playwright he so desired and endeavored to be. (Franco 3; Luis 83; Labrador-Rodríguez 14; Arroyo 66) For Plácido, this meant he would be remembered more as a martyr – and by some as a traitor to his country, race and friends – who was caught up in a conspiracy to start a slave revolution that never happened, than for the volumes of poetry he produced and his ability as a mulatto to understand and narrate all phases of Cuban society and to cry out against tyranny in Cuba while appearing to laud it at the same time. (Buscaglia-Salgado 232; Paquette 259; Cué-Fernández 25; Kusintski 84; Castellanos 12). For Derkes, this would mean that his work would appear to be written by a white writer at first and that when he finally did unmask his racial identity, would cause it to become forgotten, virtually lost and critically under-analyzed for over a century and a quarter (Ramos-Perea 3 – 4, 9, 16 – 19).

The purpose of this dissertation therefore is to re-evaluate the texts of Manzano, Plácido and Derkes as three influential authors not recognized by

some scholars as important factors in nineteenth century literary production and discourse. In this light I will show how their texts and discourses developed independently through their own efforts to gain enfranchisement and legitimacy within the social and historical context of the colonial plantation and *hacienda* economic systems that characterized their lives. I will also re-evaluate the positioning of these texts within nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century criticism, demonstrating that their unique perspective as subjects within the very system they are writing about empowers their texts to reach further and have greater impact on modern literary criticism than do the texts written by authors who write about these same subjects but from outside of the system looking in. I will show that because of their ability to narrate life in the nineteenth century Spanish Caribbean, both as subjects of Spanish colonial authority and of the societies produced by an economy based on sugar production and slave labor, heavily steeped in classist and racist attitudes, they each create their own counter-discourse that functions *inter-dicta*; both as a reaction to and a product of the hegemony they are forced to appropriate, between the lines of hegemony and against it at the same time. This will also show how despite heavy censorship, each author is able to raise his voice in protest against the controlling and oppressive societal structures surrounding him despite its explicit prohibition. As a by-product of my analysis, it is my hope that the urgency to study these texts and the issues of colonialism, race, class, literature under censorship and hegemonic expectations with renewed vigor and critical understanding will result



in new avenues of analysis and will broaden not only our understanding of these works but of Manzano, Plácido and Derkes themselves. Understanding them not only allows us to understand more about Cuba and Puerto Rico but about the Spanish Caribbean in general and our own places as critics and observers of the human condition in Latin American and the Caribbean for the immediate present and future generations as well.

### **Organization**

This dissertation is organized in the following manner: Chapter one will present an analysis of both Manzano's narrative *Autobiografía* (1937) and will discuss how he is able to narrate slave life and culture in a plantation economy and subsequently reveal a unique plantation discourse beyond that of the romantic anti-slavery and reformist discourse. In chapter two I will continue the discussion of the plantation counter-discourse first established by Manzano with *Autobiografía* and will show how this is reflected in his poetic work *Versos* (1937) and his over-looked and under analyzed drama *Zafira* (1842). I will look at the autobiographical tendencies in his work and demonstrate how through the discursive practice of autobiography, he is able to talk about and criticize Cuba even when his texts are set in other parts of the world. Chapter three will analyze the poetry of Plácido (Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés) in light of the events that led to and culminated in his martyrdom in the Escalera Conspiracy of 1844. I will demonstrate how his texts reflect the controlling discourse of the time while proving to be subversive and revolutionary at the same time. Finally, Chapter

four will re-introduce the texts of Eleuterio Derkes through an analysis of his life and desperate struggle for existence and recognition within the racist and classist societal structure of late nineteenth century Puerto Rico. Through a detailed close textual analysis I will demonstrate how his texts fit within the parameters of the hegemonic *hacendado* discourse yet were crafted subtly and cleverly enough that he was able to criticize that same society without its knowledge until he did so overtly and irreverently, suggesting that his texts should hold the same canonical positioning as those of Manzano and Plácido.

## Chapter 1

### Colonialism, Race and Slavery in Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía*: a Plantation Counter-Discourse

To fully understand this autobiography, we need to keep in mind that the narrator's is a reluctant voice. [. . .] In evaluating the nature of [Manzano's] slave discourse, the force of the master discourse – that of the hegemonic white oligarchy, Creole or Spanish – is paramount.

- Ivan A. Schulman, "Introduction",  
*Autobiography of a Slave*

*Sab* es una novela preciosa para el romanticismo español; con ella nace, aunque tardíamente, la verdadera novela de sentimiento. *Sab* es nuestro *Atala* romántico.

– Carmen Bravo-Villasante, *Una vida romántica: La Avellaneda*

#### Introduction – A New Discursive Consideration of Manzano's *Autobiografía*

The difficult life of the “esclavo-poeta” (Franco 3) Juan Francisco Manzano is well documented not only in his own *Autobiografía* (1937)<sup>1</sup> but through the many scholars who have studied him as a literary figure and emerging intellectual in early nineteenth century Cuba. Among the first to pay attention to Manzano's career was his contemporary, the white reformist intellectual Domingo Del Monte, who arranged for Manzano's manumission and encouraged Manzano

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<sup>1</sup> Though there were various other versions of *Autobiografía* published throughout the nineteenth century, none were published in Cuba nor were they published in Spanish until José Luciano Franco's 1937 edition. The earliest publication of the text was 1840 in Richard R. Madden's translated *Poems of a Slave on the Island of Cuba* (1840).

to write his *Autobiografía* (Franco 3). While it is certain the legacy of this text has come to be of much more worth than the original amount required for the purchase of Manzano's freedom, at the time of its writing it held distinctly different values for both of these individuals.

For Manzano, the text was simply "the story of (his) life<sup>2</sup>" (Franco 85) and not only represented his freedom from bondage, but an opportunity to further establish his voice as a writer as he had already garnered a certain amount of fame as a poet. For Del Monte, the text became a useful tool which he circulated among the members of his *tertulia* meetings (Luis 83, Labrador-Rodriguez 14), making the enslaved Manzano a champion of their abolitionist and reformist goals. What perhaps neither of them foresaw at the time however, was the far-reaching influence the text would arguably have as the center piece of the dominant literary discourse in early nineteenth century Cuba. While a great deal of attention has been given to the study of this reformist anti-slavery discourse and the other texts associated with it, Manzano's work has all too frequently been categorized along the same lines of this Del Monte driven discourse and as a consequence Manzano has at times been remembered more as a historical figure surrounding this discourse than as an author and discursive participant from within it. Instead of analyzing Manzano solely as a self-educated slave who wrote poetry and his narrative *Autobiografía*, as traditionally has been done, in this chapter I will discuss how he narrates the socioeconomic conditions and

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

cultural circumstances of early nineteenth century Cuba through a unique subjectivity and perspective, inherent to Cuba and the plantation system in which he lived. Applying the postmodern theories of Antonio Benítez-Rojo on the socioeconomic development of the Caribbean and the subsequent establishment of plantation discourse, and the post-colonial conclusions of Homi Bhabha on race and the ambivalence of the subject, I show how the writings of Manzano exhibit a different discourse than has previously been ascribed to them; a plantation counter-discourse that functions inter-dicta, between the lines of hegemony while mimicking it at the same time. Key to my argument is also a counter-point analysis of *Sab* (1838) by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. Both of these canonical works provide a powerful account of colonialism, racism and Cuban slavery that describe plantation and colonial life from the point of view of the subject within this system. Due to their marginalized status in society and as Cuban colonial subjects and the historical situation in which they lived, Manzano and Avellaneda are able to provide a narration of the issues of race and slavery in early nineteenth century Cuba from the inside looking out, which differs greatly from the other authors associated with the predominant discourse and social class, who could only write about these same issues from the outside looking in. In addition to the contributions already attributed to them, my analysis of the plantation counter-discourse present in their texts allows us to consider Manzano as much more than a self-educated slave-poet who wrote a heavily mediated autobiography intended to support and incite sentiment against slavery in Cuba

and to reconsider his *Autobiografía* and Avellaneda's *Sab* in a post-colonial light that continues to make them relevant and significant texts today.

### **Overlooking *Autobiografía*: a Critical Omission**

In Roberto González Echevarría's seminal text *Myth and Archive: A Theory of the Latin American Narrative*, González Echevarría traces the evolution of the modern novel and identifies the hegemonic Latin American discourse of the nineteenth century as a scientific literary discourse, more closely associated with Naturalism than with other discourses and literary movements functioning in Latin America at the same time. While his reasoning is solid and logical, I also find that it does contain some major critical flaws and obvious contradictions that tend to marginalize the importance of texts such as those of Manzano and Avellaneda. A close analysis of his argument concerning the development of Latin American narrative in *Myth and Archive* illustrates how some critics may have overlooked or misappropriated these texts in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and gives us an opportunity to consider Manzano's work in a much broader context.

Throughout the nineteenth century Latin American and Caribbean literature was heavily influenced by a variety of literary movements and ideals whose original roots were primarily European. The broad categories of movements such as Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism and Naturalism in Latin America are essentially European at their inceptions though as each of these literary and artistic movements progressed and flourished in Latin America

they would each prove to be distinctively different evolutions of these same European processes. As a consequence, the predominant, controlling discourses of the time also stemmed from European sources, causing developing Latin American and Caribbean discourses to be categorized and defined according to European ideals instead of being recognized as independent and separate from their original foundations.

In the first chapter of *Myth and Archive* González Echevarría postulates a theory of the development of the modern novel by contrasting the developmental processes of the Latin American and Spanish novel forms. Rejecting prevalent theories that the novel is derived primarily from the epic, he concludes instead that it is born of multiple origins and multiple discourses, and that is a continuous process that keeps repeating itself.

The novel's origin is not only multiple in space but also in time. Its history is not, however a linear succession or evolution, but a series of new starts in different places. The only common denominator is the novel's mimetic quality, not of a given reality, but of a given discourse that has already "mirrored" reality. (8)

This "mirrored reality" was established by an already active discourse that was dictated by the very events narrated by the text and the authors' necessity to gain legitimacy within that discourse and socio-historic context of the times. Two chapters later, In his analysis of the Inca Garcilaso's *Commentarios Reales* he points out that the early Spanish novels like *La Celestina*, and many Latin

American histories, like *Comentarios*, derived primarily from a Spanish tradition of Golden Age legal rhetoric in an effort to gain enfranchisement and legitimacy for their texts.

The novel, as well as much of the history of the New World, was told within the rhetorical constraints imposed by the new, centralized state of Spain. It was through the rhetoric of the notarial arts, and not as a result of a literary tradition, that the authors of *La Celestina* and the picaresque novels were able to incorporate the details of everyday life into their fictions. These fictions involved the life of the disenfranchised of society, who sought legitimation through the very act of writing. Thematically this was expressed in *La Celestina* and the Picaresque by the orphanage or illegitimacy of the protagonist, in the chronicles by the real issue of enfranchisement in the new society (the *encomienda*, the state bureaucracy). The novel and the history of the New World – as well as latter narratives concerned with the uniqueness of Latin America, are like letters written to a central authority, because legal rhetoric always implies a textual exchange or dialogue, a petition or appeal or an answer to some sort of accusation. (69-70)

Instead of being established upon principles of literary theory and tradition alone, the Spanish novel and early Latin American chronicles were derived through a more mimetic discursive process that sought its own authorization as these early authors often sought to achieve purposes that were other than literary. In fact,



González Echevarría points out that one of the most salient facts about the early novel is its attempt to not be literary at all, citing examples such as *Don Quijote*; “supposed to be a translation of a history written in Arabic” (7) and *Lazarillo de Tormes*; “a deposition written for a judge” (7).

While at their inceptions the Spanish and Latin American novel forms share this same basic premise and rhetorical identity, González Echevarría is clear in indicating that the two then follow very separate paths as the novel developed in Spain and Latin America respectively. In Spain, epic themes do become more apparent as the novel develops. In the case of the Latin American novel, González Echevarría points out that it is history itself that establishes it and, that due to this origin, Latin American history cannot be separated from literature nor escape its implications.

Because of its repository of stories about the beginnings of modern Latin America, history is crucial in the creation of this myth. Latin American history is to Latin American narrative what the epic themes are to Spanish literature: a constant whose mode of appearance may vary, but which is rarely absent. (6)

Anti-Bahktinian and pro-Foucaultian in his concepts, González Echevarría explains that he “see(s) the novel as part of the textual economy of a given epoch” (8) and that he more readily emphasizes “texts that are part of official culture in the formation of the novel” (9) over texts derived from less official or more folkloric sources.

[T]he novel, having no fixed forms of its own, often assumes that of a given kind of document endowed with truth bearing power by society at specific moments in time. The novel [. . .] mimics such documents to show their conventionality, their subjection to strategies of textual engenderment similar to those governing literature which in turn reflect those of language itself. It is through this simulacrum of legitimacy that the novel makes its contradictory and veiled claim to literariness [. . .]. The novel, therefore is part of the discursive totality of a given epoch, occupying a place opposite its ideologically authoritative core. (8)

As he traces the evolution of Latin American narrative from its inception through the nineteenth century, he pays particular attention to books and texts originally written for more official purposes than for their contribution to the literary canons of their time. This evolutionary landscape includes such texts as Hernán Cortéz's *Cartas de relación* (1519 - 1526) and el Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's *Comentarios reales de los incas* (1609). As mentioned previously, these chronicles follow a Spanish rhetorical tradition of (10) and, like the picaresque *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), were both written as appeals to a higher authority to "gain enfranchisement" (11). He further cites the "scientific travelogue" (11) as an important mediating factor in nineteenth century Latin American narratives that ultimately lead to the development of the Latin American novel in the twentieth century. He does not consider romantic novels such as *Amalia* (1866) and *Maria* (1867) as real participants in this evolution

despite the fact that Latin American literary history places them at the center of canonical establishment. Highly critical of this appraisal of these novels he concludes that this positioning is

[A]n uncritical copy of European literary history which veils the fact that the most significant narratives, the ones that had a powerful impact in those that followed in the twentieth century, were not novels copied from European models as Mármol's and Issacs' texts were, but issue from the relationship with the hegemonic discourse of the period which was not literary, but scientific. (12)

Because books like *Amalia* and *Maria* more closely appropriate the European literary styles of Romanticism and Realism, for González Echevarría their impact on nineteenth and twentieth century texts is not as great as texts that developed in Latin America through a more scientific approach and style more representative of Naturalism. According to him, the texts which responded to this hegemonic scientific discourse include even some of the more conventional novels that do compare in some rights to *Amalia* and *Maria*, such as Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdes* (1880), and Anselmo Suárez y Romero's *Francisco* (1880)<sup>3</sup>. Among these texts, González Echevarría also included Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo* (1845), and Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* (1902) because they "describe Latin American nature and society through the

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<sup>3</sup> While not published formally until 1880, both Villaverde's and Suárez y Romero's text were written in 1839, the latter being included in Richard. R. Madden's dossier decrying slavery that was sent to British authorities in that same year.

conceptual grid of nineteenth-century science” (12). They are texts that observe the human condition and comment on it through an empirical scientific formula by re-narrating the actual events and conditions through fiction and non-fiction.

This is, however, where González Echevarría’s argument begins to break down as he reveals in this statement a major critical blind spot that does not take into account some of the discourses that were functioning concurrently in Latin America in the early part of the nineteenth century alongside the scientific hegemonic scientific discourse to which he refers. González Echevarría ignores altogether some of the more important “modeling” and “molding” texts of the period that had great influence not only on other nineteenth century works, but on twentieth century texts as well. Because he includes a significant discussion of *Francisco* in this section of his argument the most glaring omission González Echevarría makes is obviously that of Manzano’s *Autobiografía*, after whom Suárez y Romero’s novel is appropriately named. Including a discussion of *Autobiografía* at this juncture in his argument would only serve to strengthen his point and leaves two critical questions unanswered. First, if Manzano’s text – written by a slave who learned to write by copying his master’s handwriting – is not an already “mirrored reality” then how should it be considered? And second, if not an appeal to a higher authority to “gain enfranchisement” for a specific political goal, what purpose then did the first publication of *Autobiografía* serve? As a further look at González Echevarría’s argument suggests, these questions were never addressed as it is obvious that Manzano and his *Autobiografía* were

altogether overlooked as a significant contributor to the nineteenth century literary landscape he describes in his book.

In his close analysis of the texts *Facundo*, *Os sertões*, *Cecilia Valdés*, and *Francisco*, González Echevarría comments that they are “(l)ike the chronicles of discovery and conquest, which were often legal documents, [. . .] whose original role lies outside of literature” (12) and “are narrated through the mind of a writer qualified by science to search for the truth” (12). The example he uses in his argument however falls far short of proving his point and in reality serves to broaden the gap between the Latin American writers he is omitting and the hegemonic European scientific discourse to which he refers. He cites the fact that Suarez y Romero's *Francisco* was originally intended to be an addition to a “report sent to the British authorities documenting the horrors of slavery in Cuba” (12), as if that report were more scientific than emotional or literary in nature. While it is certain that *Francisco* was written to convey a negative picture of Cuban slavery and in the context of its inclusion in this “report sent to British authorities” it leaves a legacy that does lie, as González Echevarría states, “outside of literature.” Taken out of its literary context and associated so closely with the abolitionist and reformist movements of the time, *Francisco* is remembered more for its social value than for its literariness. While it is undoubtedly a romantic text written by a skilled author with a specific literary

intent,<sup>4</sup> it has taken on a separate socio-historical identity. González Echevarría's quick gloss of the dossier that Richard R. Madden spent years in Cuba gathering and preparing, not only downplays the importance of the dossier itself and the romantic agenda contained in the text *Francisco*. It completely ignores and marginalizes the more important contribution that it contained; the translated versions of some of Manzano's poetry his *Autobiografía*.

This type of omission or lack of recognition is not however exclusive to González Echevarría; it is symptomatic of a greater lack of understanding about Manzano as an author (Branche 63) and the discourse he sets forth, not only in his well-studied and commented *Autobiografía*, but in his lesser known *Versos*<sup>5</sup> and his almost ignored drama *Zafira*. To a lesser extent, the same can be argued about Avellaneda, whose work *Sab* has been at times discounted over the years by well-meaning critics as a simply romantic love story, comparable to Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801) and Issac's *María* (Bravo-Villasante 69; Schulman 363; Garfield and Schulman 169; Álzaga 14; Barreda 71-82). Undoubtedly because of this González Echevarría would also classify *Sab* therefore as a

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Anselmo Suárez y Romero and the construction of *Francisco* see the first chapter of William Luis' *Literary Bondage: Slavery in Cuban Narrative* entitled "The Anti-Slavery Narrative".

<sup>5</sup> Manzano never titled his works of poetry as a whole nor did he title his autobiography, but referred to it simply as "la historia de mi vida" (Franco 85). His works were published together in several different editions, beginning with Richard R. Madden's *Poems of a Slave in the Island of Cuba* (1840). Most often his poetry is referred to as "Versos" or "Poesías," depending on the edition of his work consulted. For the purposes of this work, I will follow the suggestion of the 1972 edition of the text by José Luciano Franco whose 1937 version is generally considered the closest to the original text (Labrador-Rodríguez 13), in which Franco refers to them as *Versos* and the autobiography as *Autobiografía*. In other instances, I will also refer to Abdeslam Azougarh's more recent version of Manzano's works entitled *Juan Francisco Manzano: Esclavo poeta en la isla de Cuba* (2000) which incorporates a broader scope of texts from both centuries in an attempt to include more of Manzano's works in one volume (Azougarh 61).

derivative of the European literary models like he does *Amalia* and María while more recent criticism has found a place for it within a feminist discourse. While these points are evident and well developed, they also serve to marginalize Avellaneda to an extent by arguing that her fame is derived in great part from her participation as a romantic feminist author in an anti-slavery discourse rather than for some of the other important contributions her text makes, including the plantation counter-discourse that I identify in my reading of *Sab* as a counter-point to *Autobiografía*.

My work in this chapter therefore shows in these texts that Manzano and Avellaneda establish a broader historical discourse of race, class, and artistic production specific to the Caribbean and its colonial subjects that can allow us to view Manzano not only as a slave and Afro-Caribbean colonial subject, nor Avellaneda simply as a feminist romantic author, but as founders of discourse and narrative strategy for generations to follow not only in Cuba but in the entire Caribbean as well. Furthermore, I show how these two authors address the issues of racism, slavery, and colonialism in their texts from a unique position related to their own subjectivity, establishing a discourse that moves inter-dicta, or counter to the established dominant discourse and how criticism has tended to ignore or silence these themes in their work. By identifying the existence of this discourse it is my hope that this opens new avenues of critical thinking regarding these texts and that ultimately, we are able to consider them that much more Latin American and Caribbean because of it.

## **Sab, Manzano and Caribbean Subjectivity**

At first glance one would expect there to be little more in common between Cuban contemporaries Juan Francisco Manzano and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda other than country and time period. After all, Manzano was a self-educated Afro-Cuban slave and Avellaneda was the well-educated, yet sheltered daughter of a rich, white, Spanish military leader stationed in Cuba (Servera 12). Manzano was born and raised in Matanzas in the north, while Avellaneda was from Camagüey and then left Cuba for Spain in 1836 (Servera 47). They belonged to two seemingly different worlds and undoubtedly saw their colonial circumstances in Cuba through distinctively different shades of understanding. Through their writing, however, we are able to see, that on many levels they had much more in common than could have ever been expected.

First and most obvious among these similarities is the issue of slavery. Manzano was born a slave and, for that fact, would never escape it; Avellaneda was surrounded by slavery, her parents being slave owners (Servera 12). Both of them confronted the issue head on in their writing but, due to heavy censorship, would not see *Autobiografía* or *Sab* published in Cuba until after their deaths. As Vera Kutzinski points out “not a single anti-slavery narrative passed the censor until 1875 [. . .] only [. . .] *Sab* and [. . .] *Autobiography* escaped that fate by being published outside of Cuba, in Spain and England respectively” (19). Also, for reasons owing to the romantic nature of these texts, they do not attempt to relate the history of Latin America nor of the Caribbean as do the other more scientific



texts to which González Echevarría refers; neither did they have access to the hegemonic discourse he describes. Instead, they establish their own discourse by relating the personal story of two individuals, one fictional and one autobiographical, whose lives bear the marks of the socio-historical conditions in which they lived. They are first and foremost Spanish colonial subjects, who, as authors, not only wrote about the constraints of Cuban colonial subjectivity, but lived under them as well, supporting their claims of injustice and giving their stories validity and power. They lived in a time of racial turmoil in which Spain's colonial authority in the New World was beginning to erode and the fear of rebellion was constant. Colonial authorities sought to maintain control of not only legal and political power but of the economy as well. This also meant controlling the slave population and any anti-slavery discourse that surfaced. As prior events in the Caribbean had shown, they had good reasons for doing so, two of them to be specific. The first and most chilling of these happened before the birth of either Manzano or Avellaneda in a neighboring island and the second happened in Cuba during the early part of their lives. Both events would change Caribbean history in both positive and negative ways and would structure the socio-historical framework that would foster what I consider their plantation counter discourse. These events are of course the Haitian Revolution that ended with Haiti's independence in 1804 and the Aponte Rebellion of 1812.

When the *Voudou* priest Boukman (Buck-Morss 833) inspired a slave revolt in the French colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791 he did not envision all the

lasting implications that his actions and those of his followers would have on the Caribbean and the Western world altogether. Though the universal principles of liberty and freedom behind Boukman's initial revolt were circulated among the highest levels of cultured French society, there was little that the French could do or did to change the status of slavery and challenge the status quo. But, before this challenge could affect change in Haiti, it had to come directly from the body of the slave population itself. As Susan Buck-Morss records:

Although abolition of slavery was the only possible logical outcome of the ideal of universal freedom, it did not come about through the revolutionary ideals or even the revolutionary actions of the French; it came about through the actions of the slaves themselves. The epicenter of this struggle was the colony of Saint-Domingue. In 1791 while even the most ardent opponents of slavery dragged their feet, the half million slaves in Saint-Domingue, the richest colony not only of France but of the entire colonial world, took the struggle for liberty into their own hands, not through petitions, but through violent, organized revolt. (833)

Though the French Republic tried to beat down the revolt and succeeded in incorporating the black colonial army as part of its own forces for a time through the seeming defection of General Toussaint L'ouverture (Trouillot 37), they were never able to officially reinstitute slavery. It was as it seemed a war that was lost as it began. By 1793 slavery as an institution and practice was finished in Haiti and in 1794 "the armed blacks of Saint-Domingue forced the French Republic to

acknowledge the *fait accompli* of the abolition of slavery on the island” (833). This was not nearly the end of the revolution however as the next few years would see the birth a new nation comprised almost completely of blacks through a series of bloody and treacherous conflicts with the French Republic (Buck-Morss 833-837; Trouillot 33-53). In 1801 L’ouverture wrote a new constitution for the colony that abolished slavery forever and in 1804 the slave born general Jean-Jacques Dessalines leading an army of former slaves, “defeated the French troops and destroyed the white population, establishing in 1805 an independent, constitutional nation of “black” citizens, an “empire”- mirroring Napoleon’s own, which he called by the Arawak name, Haiti” (Buck-Morss 835).

The history of the Haitian Revolution<sup>6</sup> is a long and complicated story featuring many interesting and unforgettable characters. It is a story filled with intrigue, political astuteness and violence in which former slaves become colonels, generals, governors and kings. The names of the heroes Boukman, San Souci, L’ouverture, Dessalines, François, and Christophe, would be associated with rebellion and freedom and would strike fear in to the hearts of white slave owners in the Caribbean as well as North America and Europe. They had accomplished what for their time was considered “unthinkable even as it

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<sup>6</sup> The most pertinent late twentieth and early twenty first century studies and analyses of the Haitian Revolution that I have consulted for this work include C.L.R. James’ *The Black Jacobins* (1989); Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* (1995) , Joan Dayan’s *Haiti, History, and The Gods* (1995) and Susan Buck-Morss’ article “Hegel and Haiti” (2000). For obvious reasons, I cannot endeavor to re-tell the history in its entirety, but for a brief and concise retelling of the events I refer you to this works. For a more detailed and comprehensive history of the Revolution see Robin Blackburn’s *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (1988).

happened” (Trouillot 73). As historian David Patrick Geggus notes: “[n]ever before had a slave society successfully overthrown its ruling class” (114). For this reason, little was circulated about the revolution and the event has suffered from critical attention as well. Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls this general lack of historiography surrounding the revolution a “silencing” (97) and in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* he analyzes the effects this had on the world.

The general silence that Western historiography has produced around the Haitian Revolution originally stemmed from the incapacity to express the unthinkable, but it was ironically reinforced by the significance of the revolution for its contemporaries and for the generation immediately following. From 1791 to 1804 to the middle of the century, many Europeans and North Americans came to see that revolution as a litmus test for the black race, certainly for the capacities of all Afro-Americans. [. . .] Finally, the silencing of the Haitian Revolution also fit the relegation to an historical backburner of the three themes to which it was linked: racism, slavery and colonialism. (97-98)

Trouillot points out that the silencing of the Revolution took hold almost immediately in revolutionary France and extended throughout the Caribbean and Europe fueled by the common denominators of fear and loss. For the rest of the Caribbean, another revolution of this magnitude could prove too costly for the mother countries to bear. In Cuba, this silencing started out through simple

omission of the facts, but as its own conspiracies began to brew it would take on an entirely different face altogether and ultimately play an important part in the foundation of the plantation counter discourse.

In his recent book *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery* (2006), historian Matt Childs carefully illustrates the social, economic and political conditions of Cuban society prior to the Aponte Conspiracy<sup>7</sup> in 1812. He records the beginning of an unfolding of events that would shape Cuban culture and society for over a century and that would foster the discourse of Manzano and Avellaneda. Drawing on trial testimony and other historical accounts of the events and those leading up to it, Childs records that

[T]he Aponte Rebellion of 1812 represents a crucial episode at the threshold of nineteenth-century Cuban history when the initial development of the sugar plantation economy transformed the island from its long established role as a port of call for ships trading in the Atlantic to the most prized colony in the rapidly disintegrating Spanish empire. In 1789 the Spanish Crown declared free trade in slaves throughout the empire. No colony in Spanish America capitalized on the decree more than Cuba. (9)

Following this decree Childs estimates that over 300,000 slaves were transported to Cuba between 1790 and 1820. This influx began to transform Cuban society

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<sup>7</sup> Childs notes that he uses the term “Rebellion” instead of “Conspiracy” as it is more commonly known, to denote the fact that the conspiracy was an overt attempt at rebellion against colonial authority.

radically and polarized racial and social tensions to the point of bursting. Childs again comments on these conditions:

The expansion of slavery during the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century caused radical social, political, economic, and cultural transformations of Cuban society; these changes, in turn, gave birth to the 1812 Aponte Rebellion (9).

The uprising that took place proved to be bloody and costly to both sides. As soon as the rebellious slaves and free people of color revolted, the white colonial authority struck back in kind to quell any further insurgency. Childs records the lasting consequences it would have on Cuba and how it unfolded beginning in January of 1812. Slaves and free people of color rebelled against their masters on five different plantations, killing whites and burning property. The response to the rebellion was just as brutal and intended to be an even more horrifying and poignant message to future uprisings. The public execution of fourteen rebels were greeted with “enthusiasm” (2) by the white society and the island seemed to breathe a sigh of relief as another sixty-three prisoners were sent to Florida (2).

This response immediately brought peace to the island and though for a short time colonial authorities seemed to have it under control, the rebellion soon flared up again and spread across Cuba to the outskirts of Havana. Again, white overseers and their families were killed and many others were injured before the local militia brought the rebels under control (3).

A general panic among the whites ensued and they cried for justice. This time the colonial authorities' search led them to the house of José Antonio Aponte where they found evidence that he had organized the uprisings. Most frightening to them among the articles they collected as evidence included several portraits of Henry Christophe, Touissant L'ouverture, Jean François and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Even the idea of the idea of the Haitian Revolution circulating among the Cuban populace could not be tolerated, the "unthinkable" could not happen in Cuba. As a consequence, Childs records that the Marqués de Someruelos, who then was then the Captain General of Cuba, needed to act quickly and decisively to quell this and other possible future rebellions. In one of his last official acts in that office decided in fear

[t]hat he would 'present a horrifying example in the gallows' for those who attempt to rise in rebellion. Only two weeks after the search of his house, authorities ended Aponte's life by hanging. Immediately afterwards, they displayed his decapitated head in the 'most public and convenient location to offer a warning lesson to his followers'. (4)

Once again, the idea of revolution and the traces of the Haitian Revolution itself were silenced by a colonial power struggling to maintain its economic and political dominance. The Aponte Rebellion, though it never came to fruition, served to remind Cuba and its colonial authority of the potency of similar movements taking place in the Caribbean and "confirmed masters' fears of the

external influences of the Age of Revolution and most especially the Haitian Revolution in catalyzing [. . .] insurrection” (Childs 186).

Born in 1797 and 1814 respectively, Manzano and Avellaneda lived very much within this climate that Childs has described and experienced firsthand the transformation of the island from a colonial territory to a plantation society. As young writers, neither Manzano nor Avellaneda would have had access to the court records and accounts of the rebellion that Childs quotes frequently in his text. However they would have lived in these conditions and would have known about them extensively, especially since the acts of rebellion and retaliation occurred primarily in Puerto Príncipe and Matanzas, the home cities of Avellaneda and Manzano respectively. Also, being a local colonial authority himself and slave owner, Avellaneda’s father undoubtedly had participated in the campaigns to quash the revolt. In fact, after his premature death and her mother’s subsequent re-marriage to another Cuban colonial official, the family moved back to Spain in light of these same tensions and turbulent times (Servera, 12; Bravo-Villasante 26). And, although never mentioned in *Autobiografía*, the harsh treatment recorded by Manzano at the hands of his masters certainly testifies to the increase of institutional violence as a consequence of the Aponte Rebellion as well. The idea of rebellion was constantly feared in Cuba and hung over the heads of both, and racial tensions were never more present or more intense. However, writing about these tensions overtly and openly would prove most difficult and even impossible. Following



Trouillot's analysis of the silencing of the Haitian revolution, we can also see in Cuban literature and some of the criticism that has followed it as well, the absence of three themes that most needed to be discussed, racism, slavery and colonialism. While various literary works have talked individually about each one of these issues, most have skirted around the subject just enough to avoid linking all three together. Even in Manzano and Avellaneda it is difficult to see how these three are linked though they are definitely present. After a careful analysis of the texts we do find that there is at least one element, constantly present, that links racism, slavery and colonialism together – the sugar plantation.

Just as González Echevarría postulates that history and literature cannot be separated when analyzing these texts, neither can the consequences of that history be ignored. The voices of Sab, Avellaneda's fictional mulatto slave, and Juan Francisco Manzano, the Cuban slave-poet, ring true not solely because of their autobiographical and testimonial nature, but because they are products of a greater discursive system that allows for these events to stand out and be recognized as poignant and meaningful, of great importance to Cuba and the Caribbean as a whole in the early nineteenth century. To better understand Sab and Manzano as Caribbean subjects, and how this definition applies to them, it is first necessary to understand Spanish-Caribbean discourse in and of itself. To do this, I will refer to the work of critic Antonio Benítez-Rojo and will use his discussion of Caribbean discourse to establish a working definition of the Caribbean subject to be applied to Sab and Manzano as literary characters.

In his chapter, “Bartolomé de Las Casas: entre el infierno y la ficción” Benítez-Rojo proposes a revision of Las Casas’ writings through a Freudian theoretical framework to establish the existence of Caribbean discourse within them. In doing so, he reveals that Las Casas deserves blame and responsibility not only for the enslavement and mistreatment of the Amerindians but also for the arrival of African slaves in the Spanish colonies. In essence, Benítez-Rojo establishes the existence of the “interplay” (104) between the African and the European poles of identity in these works that establishes a dichotomy of power and resistance. He concludes that Las Casas, for what he does not say or what he represses, conveys a sense of culpability for the African subject in the Caribbean. Because of this guilt, Benítez-Rojo names him founder of Caribbean discourse, something that had not previously been considered or analyzed in Las Casas’ works.

In the first section of the article, Benítez-Rojo notes that Las Casas often digresses from his point to reveal within himself a castration complex. These “digressions” therefore reveal a fiction that Benítez-Rojo considers “the uncanny,<sup>8</sup>” using the Freudian term. Las Casas describes the Caribbean, and Cuba in particular, as a land rich in agriculture and natural beauty but “obvia la presencia de la plantación” (81), which is to say that this image of such great significance to the Caribbean is completely absent in his work.

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<sup>8</sup> Benítez-Rojo carefully explains that he refers here to Freud’s essay entitled “Das Unheimliche” – translated to English as “The Uncanny” - published in *Imago*, V (1919).

Nótese que la narración habla de indios y de españoles, pero no de negros; de la dulzura de los naranjos, granados y cañafístulas, pero no de la dulzura de la caña; de vegas, heredades, conventos, casas y ciudades, pero no de ingenios azucareros. (80)

Las Casas also describes in detail the destruction of the Amerindians but completely ignores the death of thousands of African slaves in the same lands. Las Casas only mentions the death and destruction of these slaves after making his case for the Amerindians, as a forgotten or repressed thought. To demonstrate the notion of “the uncanny,” Benítez-Rojo cites the Las Casas’ long description of a plague of ants and establishes it as a symbol of African slavery in the Caribbean. By noting the presence of the metaphor “plaga de hormigas / plaga de negros” (282) in *Historia de las Indias* and relating that to the Freudian theory of “the Uncanny”, Benítez-Rojo’s argument highlights the existence of a foundational Caribbean discourse in Las Casas’ writings. Because of this, Benítez-Rojo declares him “founder” of this discourse in spite of all his other literary contributions to the discourse.

[L]o que hace a Las Casas fundador de lo Caribeño no es su edición del diario de Colón en su primer viaje o de las notas de Pané sobre la cultura de los taínos, ni tampoco sus descripciones naturales de las islas o su información lexicográfica y antropológica en lo que toca a los aborígenes. Las Casas puede entenderse como un fundador de lo Caribeño a partir de los capítulos que hemos visto aquí de su *Historia de las Indias*; esto

es, aquellos que dan cuenta de los pormenores que originaron la plantación de azúcar y la esclavitud africana en el Nuevo Mundo, ya que son precisamente estas instituciones las que mejor define el Caribe y las que proporcionan el sustrato más rico de lo Caribeño. [. . .] Las Casas ha alcanzado a descubrir el ciclo fatal de la plantación: a más azúcar, más negros; a más negros, más violencia, a más violencia, más azúcar; a más azúcar, más negros (102 – 103).

In naming Las Casas founder of Caribbean discourse, analyzing the presence of these Caribbean elements in his texts, and identifying the phenomenon of the plantation as a system, Benítez-Rojo amplifies the work of Las Casas to include the black African subject as an integral part of Caribbean discourse. Following this logic gives the opportunity to approximate a definition of the Caribbean subject as well and discuss the consequences that this brings to the discourse as a whole.

According to the metaphor that Benítez-Rojo establishes, we would have to conclude that the Caribbean subject would have to be a participant in this “ciclo fatal” that demonstrates the consequences that the metaphoric pairing “plaga de hormigas / plaga de negros” has not only for the Caribbean but for the world as well. This is therefore a definition of a black subject, “autochthonous” to the Caribbean in this respect and representative of the race “repressed” by Las Casas. This subject would have to directly confront the question of slavery in the Caribbean, configured around the institution of the sugar plantation. In this

aspect, it is the constant presence of the plantation in *Sab* and *Autobiografía* that permits us to consider these texts as Caribbean discourse.

Equally so, as individuals, Sab and Manzano become Caribbean subjects as they describe their personal marginalization due to their race, social position and slavery from within the context of a plantation economy. Yet, at the same time, they are also very different Caribbean subjects that experience their subjectivity as no other subject can and this is precisely what makes them especially unique and noteworthy. Both of them experience slavery from a somewhat privileged position and come in regular contact with many sides of a society clearly divided along racial and class lines. Indeed their very identities are forged by a clash of cultures that places them directly in the center of two domains of difference. Sab, who was raised from his infancy in the company of his white master's family, shares a close association with both white and black cultures, evident in all aspects of his character, but first thoroughly articulated through Avellaneda's physical description of the young slave.

No parecía un criollo blanco, tampoco era negro ni podía creérsele descendiente de los primeros habitantes de las Antillas. Su rostro presentaba un compuesto singular en que se descubría el cruzamiento de dos razas diversas, y en que se amalgamaban, por decirlo así, los rasgos de la casta Africana con los de la europea, sin ser no obstante un mulato perfecto. (104)

It is clear in this passage that Avellaneda wants to create a character that stands out in many ways from the individuals that surround him. She carefully constructs an image that can best be understood by the reader in terms of both what he is and what he is not. Just as Saab's appearance denotes his mixed heritage so does his position in society. He is the "mayoral" of the Bellavista plantation and as such does not share the same work responsibilities as the rest of the slaves, nor does he primarily associate with them. Though he is accepted among their ranks, it is apparent that due to his position there remains a cordial distance between them. Likewise, his relationship with white society is also distanced and somewhat strained. Though he grows up alongside his beloved Carlota almost as a sibling (Avellaneda 204), she will always remain his master's daughter and he will always be a mulatto slave. And though he possesses the noblest of qualities attributed to the best of white society, as I will discuss in greater detail further in this chapter, he will always be considered inferior to the members of that society, and can never realize his desires for Carlota.

In the very same way, because he realizes his soul is nobler than his position as a slave will concede him, he cannot accept his conditions of slavery with blind obedience. In his final letter to Teresa, Sab, filled with emotion, illustrates the position he alone occupies between the black and white worlds that surround him.

Me acuerdo que cuando mi amo me enviaba a confesar mis culpas a los pies de un sacerdote, yo preguntaba al ministro de Dios qué haría para

alcanzar la virtud. La virtud del esclavo, me respondía, es obedecer y callar, servir con humildad y resignación a sus legítimos dueños, y no juzgarlos nunca. Esta explicación no me satisfacía. (265)

With his answer to Sab's question, the priest divulges the only way in which slavery can peaceably maintain itself, through subservience and oppressed acceptance of racial hierarchies constructed by the dominating race. This answer is not good enough for Sab however as he sees in himself the same qualities and virtue possessed by the white society that expects his meek subservience. Questioning the reasoning given to him by the counseling priest and condemning Catholicism and slavery together in the same breath, he queries:

¿La virtud no es una misma para todos los hombres? ¿El gran jefe de esta gran familia humana habrá establecido diferentes leyes para los que nacen con la tez negra y la tez blanca? [. . .] ¿Por qué pues, tendrán los unos el derecho de esclavizar y los otros la obligación de obedecer? [. . .] ¿Dios podrá sancionar los códigos inicuos en los que el hombre funda sus derechos para comprar y vender al hombre, y sus intérpretes en la tierra dirán al esclavo; “tu deber es sufrir: la virtud del esclavo es olvidarse de que es hombre, renegar de los beneficios que Dios le dispensó, abdicar la dignidad con que le ha revestido que le imprime el sello de la infamia?”

No, los hombres mienten: la virtud no existe en ellos. (265)

Because he feels that he possesses the same nobility and character as the whites in his society, Sab recognizes that this separates him from the slave

society around him. However, because he is a slave, he knows that his nobility is limited and cannot supersede the boundaries imposed on it by slavery and its racialized ideals. He is caught between both domains of difference, part of both, but not belonging to either, causing him to curse the fate of his birth several times in his letter to Teresa:

Si el destino me hubiese abierto una senda cualquiera, me habría lanzado en ella... la tribuna o el campo de batalla, la pluma o la espada, la acción o el pensamiento... todo era igual: para todo hallaba en mí la aptitud y la voluntad... ¡Solo me faltaba el poder! Era mulato y esclavo. [. . .] A veces veía a Carlota como una visión celeste, y la oía gritarme: “¡Levántate y marcha”! Y yo me levantaba, pero volvía a caer el eco terrible de una voz siniestra que me repetía: “¡Eres mulato y esclavo!

Trapped by his mixed identity and his social position, the two words, “mulato” and “esclavo” oppress him more than slavery itself. He is not free to pursue and realize his true nobility, yet neither will he allow himself to quietly accept his subservient position. As a literary character he represents for Avellaneda the best and of both sides of nineteenth century Cuban society while the conditions of his life reflect the worst of it. Just like his physical description, Sab's character and the circumstances of his life are articulated in terms of difference and lack. Because of his social status and skin color, he will never be able to achieve his full potential and as such represents a castrated subject, destined to always be a



representation of unfulfilled nobility and intelligence in contrast to the white society that surrounds him.

Manzano's experience related in *Autobiografía* is relatively similar. He too grows up in the close company of his master's family, being the personal slave of various members of the family, including young Don Nicolás de Cárdenas. As he accompanies Don Nicolás to school, Manzano will learn how to write by mimicking his Don Nicolás' handwriting. Consequently, it is the act of writing that separates Manzano from both elements of society. His literacy sets him apart from the other slaves as he possesses an ability that they do not and which for slaves is expressly prohibited, as Manzano himself mentions frequently throughout his narrative. On the other hand, it is his lack of a full formal education that separates him from the white, lettered society that surrounds him. He is acutely aware of this, even referring to himself as "medio poeta" (Manzano 78) in a letter to his benefactor Domingo Del Monte. In her analysis of Manzano's interaction with Del Monte and Richard Madden in the creation of *Autobiografía* as "un texto intervenido" (Arroyo 65), Jossianna Arroyo concludes that this puts Manzano in a subaltern position of power between the two poles of racialized difference.

Al llamarse a sí mismo "medio poeta", Manzano mediante las "tretas del débil" trae a la luz su condición de saberse parte de un medio, que se abre a varias connotaciones: en específico, su poder de mediación entre

el margen y el centro. Manzano entiende su condición subalterna frente al mundo letrado. (66)

Arroyo concludes that Manzano's acknowledgement of his subaltern position allows him to gain a sense of authorial power. As he is separated by writing from his original social class, and separated as well from lettered society by his lack or incompleteness of formal literacy, he becomes a decentralized figure in the symbolic order. He cannot belong to both societies at the same time and in writing his physical and emotional torture in such a testimonial and historical fashion, he in essence becomes "un nuevo sujeto de la escritura;" (70) an "other" in the face of the lettered white society represented by Del Monte, and an "other" to the rest of the slave population that cannot and do not share in his transgression of the symbolic patriarchal order through the written word.

Like Avellaneda's fictional Sab, Manzano is trapped between the two worlds that surround him. They are both *others* to both societies, and ultimately to themselves. They are as Homi Bhabha describes, ambivalent "interstitial" (2) subjects that approximate their master's status but can never become them. They are "almost, but not white" (89) individuals that are forced into what he calls the "Third Space" (39), a space represented by the overlapping of two homogenous cultures operating within one society that act to define that society as a whole.

The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of

the subject positions [. . .] that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectives and to focus on those moments of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood [. . .] in the act of defining society itself. [. . .] It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest or cultural value are negotiated.” (1-2)

As both colonial and literary subjects, Manzano and Avellaneda through Sab, stand in these “in-between spaces” (Bhabha 1) of both societies and are able to experience colonial subjectivity from multiple perspectives and describe it with a uniqueness and singularity found lacking in the other anti-slavery texts of the time period such as *Francisco*. Indeed they describe nineteenth century Cuban society as no other truly can because they experienced it as no other truly did. Their ability to tell the history of their time period stems not from their formal training as scientific observers of their society, but from their own experiences from within it. Their texts are able to relate the conditions of the slave through personal testimony available only to them as Cuban colonial subjects and slaves. It is the combination of these elements that makes Manzano’s and Avellaneda’s texts different from other romantic texts of the same time period as they attack the issues of slavery, racism and colonialism all at once. This also allows us to

consider these texts, at the level of discourse, as a new and different discourse altogether.

### **(En)countering the Del Monte Circle: The Plantation Counter-Discourse**

As previously discussed, Gonzalez Echevarría points out in *Myth and Archive* that the modern novel evolved through a mimetic discursive process in which the texts were written to “mirror” a discourse of authority, often times in an effort to gain legitimacy for a cause that is other than literary. This holds true for the dominant discourse functioning in Cuba in the first half of the nineteenth century. Spurred on largely in part by Domingo Del Monte and his *tertulia* (Luís 83; Labrador-Rodriguez 14) meetings, it was a romantic anti-slavery discourse designed to reform Cuban slavery and society altogether (Paquette 100 - 103). Due to the personal and testimonial nature of Manzano’s *Autobiografía* and Avellaneda’s self-association with her title character Sab<sup>9</sup>, their narrative texts are very different from the novels Gonzalez Echevarría identifies as important contributors to the evolution of the modern novel and do not conform to the hegemonic scientific discourse he identifies. As individuals, they are not trained to relate the conditions of their subjectivity and the society in which they live through a scientific analytical framework. Also, their own personal marginalization within this society - Manzano being a black slave and Avellaneda being a young,

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<sup>9</sup> I refer here to Doris Sommer’s seminal essay “Sab c’est moi” in which Sommer carefully stipulates that even though *Sab* cannot be read as an autobiographic representation of Avellaneda, there are several factors that definitely tie them together on the level of symbolic discourse. For further discussion on this subject, I refer you to Chapter 2 where I discuss this in greater detail.

sheltered, white woman from a family of privilege with a very strict step father<sup>10</sup>; does not allow them to have direct access to the Del Monte discourse. As such, the discourse they create can only mirror or mimic the controlling discourse, a “partial representation” (Bhabha 88) that can only approximate it and never equal it, an interdictory discourse that is “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 89). As my analysis will show, though their writing appears to conform to the hegemonic expectations of the anti-slavery discourse of the Del Monte circle, it goes against it at the same time. The conditions of their subjectivity and the conditions of their discourse are one and the same. Avellaneda’s character Sab and Manzano are ambivalent subjects who appear to be a part of both slave and white societies, but in their excess, represent an “*almost*” discourse best described by Bhabha in “Of Mimicry and Man” the fourth chapter of *Location of Culture*.

*Almost the same but not white*: the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered *inter dicta*: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them. (89)

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<sup>10</sup> In the most recently published version of her epistolary autobiography, *Autobiografía y epistolarios de amor* (1999), Avellaneda records that even though she did not see much of her step-father after her mother’s marriage to him, she still felt his heavy-handed influence in her life. “Afortunadamente sólo un año estuvimos con mi padrastro, pues una real orden inicua y arbitraria nos obligaba a permanecer bajo su tutela” (51). This patriarchal dominance becomes a theme in some of her most noted works including *Sab*, *Dos Mujeres* (1842), and *La dama de Amboto* (1860).

Though the writings of both Manzano and Avellaneda appear to be like other anti-slavery texts, and have historically been classified alongside novels such as *Francisco*, *Cecilia Valdés*, and *Petrona y Rosalia* (1838) they differ greatly in scope and focus. Just as Avellaneda and Manzano as individuals are by their very nature different from the members of the Del Monte group, their texts are also separate from them in many respects. First, their themes and goals differ greatly from those of the delmontino texts and it is clear that they do not share the same political and social ideals. For Avellaneda and Manzano, writing is a more personal introspective experience bent on individual liberation rather than the sweeping social reforms suggested by Del Monte and his followers. The subsequent discourse established by the group reflects these ideals extensively whereas *Sab* and *Autobiografía* only appear to do so.

Del Monte's group consisted mainly of white Creole intellectuals including authors Félix Tanco, Cirilo Villaverde, and Anselmo Suárez y Romero. Other activists associated with Del Monte include Tomás Gener, and Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros. As Robert Paquette records in his book *Sugar is Made With Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba*, their goals, had they been achieved in their entirety, would have had far-reaching effects not only on slavery but on Cuban society as a whole.

Del Monte and his circle comported with international liberalism in seeing slavery as a malignancy, a source of moral turpitude, and the antithesis of

that autonomy essential to the moral and material progress of humankind. [. . .] However much Tanco and the other members of the Del Monte circle contributed, their particularist vision of *cubanidad* (author's emphasis) would have emptied Cuba of its blacks, not only its slaves. Rarely did they confound sympathy for the slave with sympathy for the Negro. Their passion to end the slave trade was the necessary first step in the whitening of Cuba (101).

This liberal agenda was not well received by the Spanish colonial authority as any movement against slavery was perceived as a movement against Spanish rule in Cuba (Paquette 103). Any publication produced by the group was quickly censored, forcing them to communicate their discourse via word of mouth and the hand to hand passing of manuscripts from one member to another. Because of this, the *tertulia* meetings held at Del Monte's home became the principle source of inspiration for the group and produced the very texts that González Echevarría identifies as some of the precursors to the modern Latin American novel. As Paquette records

[Del Monte's] house became the gathering spot for Cuba's young literary talent, and his guidance helped produce three powerful, proto-nationalist anti-slavery novels: Félix Tanco's *Petrona y Rosalia*, Cyril Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* and Anselmo Suárez y Romero's *Francisco*. (101)

The fact that these novels survived the censorship imposed by Spanish rule to still be relevant today, attest to the power and influence of the Del Monte

group despite the ultimate lack of fulfillment of their ideals and goals. This also speaks to the lasting power of their mouth to mouth and hand to hand discourse, which achieved a dominant status in Cuba without the benefits of publication. Instead, it existed orally and in the collective conscious of early nineteenth century Cuba. Simply put, their influence was too great to be censored away because they believed their cause was important and worthy of the risks it took to sustain it. As such their discourse permeated Cuban society and culture creating an environment favorable enough to sustain itself until the texts could finally be published formally, fomenting as well the texts of Avellaneda and Manzano.

Though it is well evidenced that *Sab* and *Autobiografía* carry the marks of this anti-slavery discourse created by Del Monte and his followers, it is also clear that they did not belong to the group proper though they both were affected and influenced by it. Manzano had direct contact with the group, attended and recited his poetry at various meetings, even publishing some of it through the help of the group , and ultimately was encouraged and even enticed by Del Monte and others to write his autobiography to ultimately garner his manumission. Despite this however, he is not historically considered a member of the group for several reasons. First and most obvious is the question of race and status. As a black self-educated slave he does not fit within the parameters of the group demography, which consisted of “los representativos más destacados, intelectuales de positivo valer, de la naciente burguesía blanca;” (Moliner 199). Second, a great majority of his work, especially his poetry, pre-dates the



existence of the Del Monte group and was in fact what first garnered Del Monte's attention towards him. Also, though it was used by the group to further their cause, Manzano's work does not entirely reflect their overall view concerning the future of slavery and Cuba itself. It does not overtly call for the social reforms suggested by the group but is more concerned with Manzano as an individual and his own personal quest for freedom. As my work in Chapter two will show, Manzano and the text of *Autobiografía* were manipulated to a certain extent by the group to fit their own purposes. Ultimately Manzano was abandoned by them following his controversial imprisonment in consequence of the Conspiracy of La Escalera<sup>11</sup>. He was allowed to be associated with the group while it served their purposes, but was still held at a distance from total inclusion. His works, though forever associated with those of the Del Monte group, bear the marks of his personal subjectivity and are inherently far different in scope and purpose than the delmontino texts. Up to this point, I have analyzed the works of Manzano and Avellaneda side by side in an effort to place them within the same socio-historical context and to begin to trace the plantation counter discourse they exhibit. However, owing to the fact that I endeavor to examine a larger range of Manzano's works in the second chapter, and because they do deserve a much more careful reading and analysis, I will briefly turn the focus of attention of the next section of this chapter (and briefly return to it again in my discussion of

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<sup>11</sup> This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 regarding Manzano and Chapter 3 regarding Plácido. For the most comprehensive analysis on this crucial time period in 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuba, I refer you to Paquette's aforementioned *Sugar is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (1988).

Manzano's play *Zafira* in chapter two) to my reading of *Sab* in order to draw parallels and conclusions about *Autobiografía* and the plantation counter-discourse both texts exhibit.

### **Romantic emotion, nature and the Caribbean Subject in *Sab***

In contrast to the direct contact Manzano had with Domingo Del Monte and his followers, there is no evidence to suggest that Avellaneda knew of the Del Monte group and their activities, though her novel certainly reflects a thorough knowledge of the problems concerning Cuban society during this time period. Also, it is clearly evident that her writing contributed greatly to the overall effect the Del Monte writers and the anti-slavery discourse had on nineteenth century Cuba. In his historical analysis of the Del Monte group and the literature it produced, Paquette records that "along with Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* [. . .] these books express a generation's frustration with slavery and a romantic search for national identity" (100). While he includes Avellaneda's novel in this group of anti-slavery texts from this time period he is careful to point out that her text and discourse differs from the rest of the group.

Except for Gómez de Avellaneda, the novelists intended to examine intimately and scrupulously Cuba's people, institutions, manners, and customs for the purpose of moral regeneration. Previous Cuban writers had ignored people of color. These writers put them on center-stage, but to great extent to show how the system was corrupting whites. (101)

While Avellaneda's text certainly puts the life of a black subject on "center-stage," she did not share the exact same reformist ideals as the Del Monte group. While their discourse called for a more conservative separation of races and the ultimate "whitening of Cuba," her more liberal and radical discourse called for the equalization of both races and the recognition of the individual above the categories of race and gender as evident in the love triangle between Sab, Carlota and Teresa (Kirkpatrick 120). This romantic theme, hyperbolized by the over-exuberance of emotions found in these three characters, finds Sab focusing his desire on Carlota who in the excitement of her youth is madly in love with Enrique Otway, the son of a wealthy English merchant, while her younger sister Teresa falls in love with Sab. Along with showing the struggles and emotional sufferings of Sab as an individual trapped by the bounds of slavery, this theme also highlights the racial tensions present in Cuba during this time period and suggests the crossing of these boundaries through a normalization and acceptance of miscegenation, obviously not a theme supported by the Del Monte group.

The themes present in *Sab* appear at first glance to be very typical of the romantic anti-slavery novel. Just as in *Francisco*, *Cecilia Villaverde*, and *Petrona y Rosalia* the main character is a slave who lament his or her status. All of these novels address the issue of slavery and to some extent racism. However, only in *Sab* do we find a narrative that condemns slavery, racism, and colonialism all at once. Unlike the writers belonging to the Del Monte circle, Avellaneda is able to

take the liberal anti-slavery discourse and twist it just slightly enough to communicate themes that otherwise would have been “unthinkable” and “silenced” by the more dominant discourse they were writing. The ambivalence of her text makes it look like a mimicry of the delmontino discourse and a different discourse all at the same time. As Bhabha describes “[t]he menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (88). As a character Sab could be read as another example that Bhabha provides to illustrate his point; an “appropriate object[] of a colonial chain of command” (88) and “authorized version of otherness” (88) that like the examples he cites is also “the figure[] of a doubling, the part object[] of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which [he] emerge[s] as [an] ‘inappropriate’ colonial subject” (88). As my reading will show, through Sab as a character, we are able to see a different version of the nineteenth century vision of otherness that addresses slavery, colonialism and racism. Instead of silencing these topics through omission and ignorance, subtly brings them to the forefront through the guise of Romanticism.

In the first chapter of *Sab*, Avellaneda uses the romantic trope of describing savage natural beauty in relation to a deep seeded emotion reflected in a character to set the story of the mulatto slave Sab. In doing so she is able to successfully illustrate the racial tensions present during this time period and attack slavery and colonialism all at once. As the story is set in the Caribbean

tropics, a great conflict builds in Sab's heart. He is a slave in love with his master's daughter and meets her future husband (his future master). As this conflict builds, the juxtaposition of natural beauty powerfully contrasted and reflected against Sab's raw emotions reveals two very different images of Cuba's heartland, one of a fertile paradise, the other of a living hell. It is through these two images that Avellaneda is able to create an emotion that immediately captures the reader's sympathy for Sab and ultimately for her condemnation of slavery.

While it is well established that *Sab* is a romantic anti-slavery novel (Schulman 363; Garfield 169; Álzaga 14; Barreda 71-82), the purpose of this reading is not to reiterate this fact. I intend to show instead how Avellaneda creates emotion within the first chapter of the text to make her work more effective as an anti-slavery treatise overall and to show how she uses Romanticism to contribute to the plantation counter discourse her text sets forth. Exploring the hyperbole of feelings in *Sab* is not a new idea either. However, little has been said about how the characters' emotions and the descriptions of nature are related. Carmen Bravo-Villasante has analyzed both elements in *Sab* but characterizes them as independent of each other. "La exaltación de sentimiento, come fuente de perfección y de singularidad es el motivo central de *Sab*, así como la descripción de una naturaleza y ambiente no vulgar, desconocida al europeo, exaltada y sobresaliente" (Bravo-Villasante 69). Analyzing the textual evidences of emotion and nature together as functions of one another in the first

chapter allows for a more directed view of *Sab* and provides a new avenue for commentary on the Romanticism of the novel as a whole.

The story, written between 1836 and 1838 (Servera 46), is set “veinte años hace, poco más o menos” (Avellaneda 101) within the same time period of Avellaneda’s birth amidst the racial tensions and furor of the aftermath of both the Haitian Revolution and the Aponte Rebellion. The narration begins with a gentleman traveling through the Cuban countryside in the province of Camagüey. The man travels down the road unhurriedly savoring “los campos fertilísimos” (102) of “sábanas inmensas donde la vista se pierde en los dos horizontes que forman el cielo y la tierra” (103) and admiring the other natural beauties of the “zona tórrida” (102) near sunset. As the sun goes down “entre ondeantes nubes de púrpura y plata” (102), the rays of “el sol terrible”(102) bathe the fields in “un colorido melancólico” (102). The vigorous and luxuriant vegetation of the parched land “parecía acoger con regocijo la brisa apacible de la tarde” (102). Vividly colored birds of all kinds fly freely through the air and rest in the fragrant limbs of the tamarind and mango trees.

Bandadas de golondrinas se cruzaban en todas direcciones buscando su albergue nocturno, y el verde papagayo con sus franjas de oro y de grana, el cao de un negro nítido y brillante, el carpintero real de férrea lengua y matizado plumaje, la alegre guacamaya, el ligero tomeguín, la tornasolada mariposa y otra infinidad de aves indígenas, posaban en las

ramas del tamarindo y del mango aromático, rizando sus variadas plumas como para recoger en ellas el soplo consolador del aura. (102-103)

On the whole, the romantic proliferation and repetition of fertile descriptions and colorful imagery, combined with the attitude of the traveler create a peaceful and somewhat bucolic feeling within the text and the reader is lulled into a false sense of well-being. However some of the images, subtly juxtaposed within the text are violent and striking, and present a very contrasting second point of view. The sun, described as “terrible” and “tórrida,” parches the land with its intense heat. The birds and vegetation all seek “albergue” and welcome “con regocijo” the night breeze. The exaggerated anticipation of the coming night suggests that daytime in the land is nearly unbearable. Just as the birds try to “recoger” and retain the coolness of the breeze, they too must be “imprisoned” by the sun’s heat during the day. While not changing the overall tone of the passage, these images foreshadow the conflict to be revealed as the traveler nears his destination and sees a farmer approaching from a distance.

The farmer and the traveler meet each other and pause momentarily to look each other over. The traveler, Enrique Otway, looks upon the farmer, Sab, and immediately defines him as mix of two races, African and European. Although Enrique judges him as a mulatto, he also mistakes him for a local landowner and speaks to Sab in the more formal ‘Ud.’ form of the Spanish ‘you’. The dialogue is very cordial and he refers to Sab as “Buen amigo” (105) and asks politely if Sab can direct him to the house of Don Carlos. Sab, also speaking

in the 'Ud.' form, tells him he will do so. The two begin traveling, Enrique on his horse and Sab walking at his side - an image that already distinguishes the higher social position of Enrique over Sab. At this point the reader is unaware that Sab is a slave but knows that he is not a social equal of Enrique even though the two are speaking in formal terms.

As Sab walks and Enrique rides, Enrique queries Sab about the land and its production. The land, as fertile as it appears, cannot produce the sugar by itself and Sab begins to tell Enrique about the life of the slave.

Es una vida terrible a la verdad [. . .] bajo este cielo de fuego el esclavo casi desnudo trabaja toda la mañana sin descanso, y a la hora terrible del mediodía jadeando, abrumado bajo el peso de la leña y de la caña que conduce sobre sus espaldas, y abrasado por los rayos del sol que tuesta su cutis, llega el infeliz a gozar todos los placeres que tiene para él la vida: dos horas de sueño y una escasa ración. (106)

Sab explains that the slave never escapes from the heat, because even as the sun goes down and the tropical breezes come to cool the earth, the slave works tending the fires of the machines that process the cane. Even in the night when "all nature rests" there is no shade or escape from the heat. Unlike the birds, the slaves are constantly "imprisoned" by heat and cannot control any aspect of their environment. The words that Sab uses to describe Cuba and the slave's working conditions (i.e. "tórrida", "cielo de fuego", "abrasado", "tuesta", "terrible", "infeliz") allude to an image of hell, a reflection of Sab's true feelings.



This emotion present in his next statement perpetuates this image as he concludes that for the slaves it truly is hell. “¡Ah! sí; es un cruel espectáculo la vista de la humanidad degradada, de hombres convertidos en brutos, que llevan en su frente la marca de la esclavitud y en su alma la desesperación del infierno” (106).

For Sab, the issue of slavery is very personal. He has experienced this “humanidad degradada” first-hand and knows that there is little hope of comfort or freedom. His following actions confirm the extent of his emotion. He halts abruptly “como si echase de ver que había hablado demasiado” (106 -107), lowers his eyes and “dejando asomar a sus labios una sonrisa melancólica” (107) and hastily assures Enrique, that though it has declined in recent years Bellavista is still a very valuable property though Sab stipulates that the cause of this decline is not due to the death of slaves, but because they have been sold to other owners along with some lands. We know by his melancholic tone and the bitterness of his speech however that this does not mean that the slaves have escaped the horrors he describes, only that they have been destined to die somewhere else on some other plantation.

Sab’s strong contempt of slavery comes out of his knowledge “que a veces es libre y noble el alma, aunque el cuerpo sea esclavo y villano” (108). Educated alongside of his master’s daughter Carlota, Sab hates slavery because he knows that he is above it and yet cannot escape it. In his mind, his soul, branded with the “la desesperación del infierno” by his birth to an African mother,

also carries with him a certain sense of nobility given to him by the race of his father. He is careful to point out that while he enjoys a more privileged status as overseer than most of the slaves and that he has never suffered “el trato duro que se da generalmente a los negros, ni he sido condenado a largos y fatigosos trabajos” (109) however, because of the color of his mother’s skin, the birthright inherited from his father is ultimately denied him. This creates in Sab a conflict that is the source of his romantic emotions. He deeply loves Carlota but because of his race will never see his love reciprocated. He is intelligent and noble but will never be free. While this passage is the only mention that Avellaneda makes of slave mistreatment throughout the whole novel, Sab’s experience transcends this omission and his hyperbolized emotions communicate that this does not make his suffering any less significant or poignant. Avellaneda does not comment in detail on the whippings and beatings the slaves received as Manzano and Anselmo Suárez y Romero do, but through Sab she does comment on what she knows and what she has seen. Sab, as a mulatto slave, is in a unique position. He has certainly seen the sufferings and beatings of his fellow slaves and has worked alongside them in sugar mill and in the fields. He knows firsthand how difficult their labor is, but he has also been a part of white master society at the same time as he has been raised along with Carlota and Teresa as another family member. Even so, as he reminds Enrique “yo nací esclavo, era esclavo desde el vientre de mi madre” (110). He is caught between both worlds, black

and white at the same time. As Pedro Barreda concludes, this ambivalence makes Sab a unique romantic hero.

This conflict between a black ethos and a white ego dramatically accentuates the romantic character of the protagonist. In Sab, we have the characteristic features of the romantic hero along with the dramatic and exotic emphasis of blackness. Consequently, the force that dominates the personality of the hero is the exaltation of sensibility and of the passion of love. [. . .] Sab becomes the black man with a “white” soul [. . .] these fundamentally romantic contradictions are the pillars on which the protagonist’s romantic nature rests. [. . .] Avellaneda has created this character by making use of the requirements of the times, which for greater dramatic effect she has attributed to a black slave. (Barreda 81)

It is because of Sab’s mixed heritage that the reader is able to believe his exaggerated emotions. The eloquence of his speech and nobility of his actions raise him to an immediate status of the ill-fated, romantic, hero but the contradictions that make his character come from the social and economic structure of the Cuban plantation. The reflection of his emotions in the aspects of nature surrounding him also serve to accentuate his predicament and transfer to the reader those same emotions. In essence, he not only communicates his own emotions, but Cuba’s emotions as well.

As the story continues, Enrique is surprised by Sab's comments and asks him if he is a friend and neighbor of Don Carlos. Sab's eyes fixate on Enrique in "su mirada indagadora" (107) and he smiles bitterly lowering his eyes,

No soy propietario, señor forastero, y aunque sienta latir en mi pecho un corazón pronto siempre a sacrificarse por don Carlos, no puedo llamarme amigo suyo. Pertenezco [. . .] a aquella, raza desventurada sin derechos de hombres. . . soy mulato y esclavo. (107-108)

As soon as Enrique knows that Sab is a slave, his attitude towards Sab changes and he assumes "el tono de despreciativa familiaridad que se usa con los esclavos" (108) and the nature of their dialogue changes. Enrique now addresses Sab in the more informal 'tu' form. The image of Enrique on the horse becomes important as well because he is now fully in a position over Sab: verbally and spatially the condescension is complete. Sab now begins to address Enrique in the very formal language of slave to master, referring to Enrique as "Su merced" (109), "señor" (109) and "Vos" (111).

Enrique further shows his lack of respect for the slave as Sab, now in front of Enrique's horse, is almost run over by the hurried animal. The roles of slave and master have been assumed and Enrique seems now to only be playing with Sab. He asks who his father is, insinuating that "tu padre sería blanco indudablemente " (109). Sab explains "con cierto orgullo" (109) that his mother was a princess, born free in the Congo, but was sold into slavery at a young age. Instead of saying that he does not know who his father is, he makes his origin

very mysterious, saying “(e)l nombre de mi padre fue un secreto que (ella) jamás quiso revelar” (109). He struggles to maintain composure as he tells Enrique of his education and his devotion to Carlota, but his voice betrays him when bitterly he proclaims “soy esclavo suyo, y quiero vivir y morir en su servicio” (111).

Enrique, deciding that he no longer needs Sab, informs him that Carlotta is betrothed to him and gallops away abruptly. As soon as Enrique is out of sight, Sab falls to the earth and moans a low moan as if he has expended all his strength through his outpouring of emotion. The powerful words and body language further illustrate the emotional conflict raging in Sab’s heart and create a brilliant contrast to the natural beauty described as Enrique rides alone. The elaborated bright colors and exotic birds placed within the peaceful imagery of the rural country mask the dark truth of the lives that cultivate the lushly described land. Juxtaposed against all this natural beauty is the noble and romantically emotional Sab. In this light, Cuba is described as both a paradise and a hell. Through this rich description the reader immediately sympathizes with Sab as his emotions pit these two views of nature against one another. This brings about an immediate sense of melancholy and despair to the senses of the reader. As Sab falls to the earth, the emotion within the text itself reaches its first climax and is transferred to the reader as the first chapter ends.

Creating this emotion within her work allows Avellaneda to decry slavery while eliciting many other turbulent elements of Cuban and Caribbean society in the early nineteenth century.

As Susan Kirkpatrick has noted, Sab's outpouring of emotion throughout the text is more than just a representation of his feelings towards Carlota: it represents a "Promethean impulse to revolt" (125) that reflects the tensions caused by the Haitian Revolution and the Aponte Rebellion. Several times he overtly mentions revolution, even revealing his own personal fantasy to participate. He first alludes to revolution as relates the legend of the indigenous cacique Camagüey, of whom his "mother" figure Martina claims to be a descendent. As he describes Camagüey's "horrible and barbarous" (Avellaneda 168) death at the hands of the Spaniards the legend portends the end of colonialism through a slave revolution in the words of Martina as re-told by Sab.

Camagüey tratado indignamente por los advenedizos, a quienes acogiera con generosa y franca hospitalidad, fue arrojado de la cumbre de esa gran loma y su cuerpo despedazado quedó insepulto sobre la tierra regada con su sangre. Desde entonces esta tierra tornóse roja en muchas leguas a la redonda, y el alma del desventurado cacique viene todas las noches a la loma fatal, en forma de luz, a anunciar a los descendientes de sus bárbaros asesinos la venganza del cielo que tarde o temprano caerá sobre ellos. Arrebatada Martina en ciertos momentos por este furor de venganza, delira de un modo espantoso y osa pronunciar terribles vaticinios. [. . .] En sus momentos de exaltación, señor, he oído gritar a la vieja india: "La tierra que fue regada con sangre una vez lo será aún otra:

los descendientes de los opresores serán oprimidos, y los hombres negros serán los terribles vengadores de los hombres cobrizos” (168)

This “unthinkable” idea is quickly suppressed by Don Carlos who interrupts Sab because he is, as other Cubans always are, “alarmados [. . .] después del espantoso y reciente ejemplo de una isla vecina”, referring directly to the Haitian Revolution.

The rejection of colonialism at this point in the novel is also expressed through Carlota who, filled with sadness over the death of Camagüey, begins to cry as Sab finishes retelling the story.

Jamás he podido [. . .] leer tranquilamente la historia sangrienta de la conquista de América. [. . .] no lloro por Camagüey ni sé si existió realmente, lloro sí al recordar una raza desventurada que habitó la tierra que habitamos [. . .] y que ha desaparecido de esta tierra (169).

She then expresses her desire that the conquest never had happened and that she and Enrique could have been born under different circumstances as “indio[s]” (169) to live a life of “amor de inocencia y libertad” (169). This inspires Sab to recognize his own desires not only for Carlota but for his desire to be free from the tethers of slavery, colonialism, and race as inside his mind he also thinks the same thoughts: “Ah sí, [. . .] no serías menos hermosa si tuviera la tez negra o cobriza. [. . .] ¿por qué no naciste conmigo en los abrasados desiertos del África o en un confín desconocido de la América?” (169-170). This fantasy is however “torn” from his mind as the Señor de B... focuses his attention

elsewhere, showing that even the slave's mind is completely controlled by his master's will.

Though his nobility of character and love for Carlota will never allow him to see the idea to fruition, Sab fantasizes about revolution in other instances as well. In his long conversation with Teresa he exclaims:

He pensado también en armar contra nuestros opresores, los brazos encadenados de sus víctimas; arrojar en medio de ellos el terrible grito de libertad y venganza; bañarme en sangre de blancos; hollar con mis pies sus cadáveres y sus leyes y perecer yo mismo entre sus ruinas (209).

As evident by these passages, the images of Haiti and the threat of what the Aponte Rebellion could have amounted to are never far removed from the collective consciousness of Cuban society and Avellaneda uses these images to remind us of their threat through the novel. These concrete rejections of colonialism are also coupled with more metaphoric images that communicate the same idea. When Kirkpatrick analyzes Avellaneda's use of romantic emotion present in Sab, she considers the image of an enraged Sab standing over a helpless Enrique as a violent thunder storm rages in the background. The violence of the storm is reflected in Sab's eyes and he becomes a metaphor for revolution. Though Avellaneda chooses to keep Sab subservient and docile, Kirkpatrick writes that he "concretizes the historical threat felt by the Cubans during the century following the Haitian revolution insofar as he protests the social order that makes his dream of love an impossible fantasy" (125).



Avellaneda uses Romanticism to create in Sab a unique Caribbean and Cuban subject that is able to communicate a discourse that not only decries slavery, racism and colonialism but creates a space within literature to discuss issues in a specific Cuban and Latin American context. Even though she uses the artifices of a hegemonic discourse that does copy a more popular European style, her juxtaposition of Cuban landscapes, Cuban subjects, and Cuban social, racial, and economic conditions with exalted and hyperbolized emotions creates a different discourse that is unique and very different from the predominant liberal discourse whose form she copies. Characterizing *Sab* as a simple romantic love story or even as a romantic anti-slavery novel robs the text of a richer and more all-incorporating Caribbean specificity and marginalizes its contribution to the Latin American canon. The image of hell the novel conveys through Sab's appraisal of the Cuban slave's working conditions and regimen transcends the boundaries of the predominant discourse in Cuba at the time and establishes the text as a form of plantation counter-discourse. In this discourse Sab describes and personifies the very essence of the "ciclo fatal" of "a más azúcar, más negros, a más negros, más violencia, a más violencia, más negros" of the plantation society. He does not experience the violence that other slaves experienced at the hands of his mistresses and masters; instead he suffers emotionally and spiritually. He properly predicts that he will die in the service of Carlota and sacrifices his life to ensure her happiness; thus the violence he suffers is no less significant than that of any other slave. His story is a picture

painted with a definite romantic paintbrush; upon closer inspection, the picture is much more complex and sophisticated than a casual first glance could ever give. As part of a plantation counter-discourse *Sab* becomes much more powerful and meaningful and makes a bigger contribution to Latin American literature than a simple “novela de pasiones” (Bravo-Villasante 69) or a text “copied from European models” (Echevarría 12) could ever do. *Sab* endures and continues to contribute to this discourse because it combines romantic aesthetic with social and racial topics that do not end with the abolition of slavery but continue to have relevance even today in a post-colonial, post-modern society.

Additionally, most pertinent to my analysis here are the salient characteristics of the fictional *Sab* whose life in many ways parallels that of Manzano. Before anything else in Cuba they will always be first considered colonial subjects and slaves, a fact that is marked by their racial heritage and the perception of the color of their skin and one they cannot hide. They are both examples – one fictional and one living – of the “ciclo fatal de la plantación”, participants in a discourse who describe it from within the bounds of their participation in it. The testimony *Sab* provides and the resulting plantation counter-discourse coincide directly with the actual life Manzano lived. When analyzed together, *Sab* serves as a punctuation mark to *Autobiografía* as it echoes Manzano’s testimony on his status as a slave and colonial subject in an economic system based on slave labor and the success of the sugar plantation. While for Avellaneda *Sab*’s sufferings and experiences were a fictional creation,

for Manzano they were very real and personal, facts that can only be understood through a more careful and thorough reading of his *Autobiografía* and are brought to life through an understanding of the plantation counter-discourse his texts express.

### **Re-writing Manzano and the Legacy of *Autobiografía***

In 1840 when Domingo Del Monte finally handed over to Richard R. Madden Anselmo Suarez y Romero's novel *Francisco: el ingenio o las delicias del campo* (1839) along with some of Manzano's works including *Autobiografía*, the British national translated them and included them as part of a report to British authorities decrying slavery. That same year, Manzano's contributions to this dossier were published in England under the title *Poems of a slave in the Island of Cuba*. This would end up being the only version of *Autobiografía* published in its entirety in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the text would not be published in Cuba, nor in Spanish for that matter, until José Luciano Franco found the original version in la Biblioteca Nacional José Martí in Havana and published it in 1937 (Azougarh 16). Later on Manzano would publish his only dramatic work, *Zafira* in 1842<sup>12</sup> in Cuba. Though it would receive little acclaim just like the poems through which he garnered his early fame, *Zafira* would be overshadowed in the following years by the lasting critical attention that *Autobiografía* received.

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<sup>12</sup> Azougarh stipulates that the date for the publication of *Zafira* is not known, as an original manuscript has not yet been found. Franco however gives the date of 1842 in his version of the text.

At the time of his death in 1853 the text of *Autobiografía* had already passed through the hands of several editors including Madden, Del Monte and Anselmo Suárez y Romero. The promised second part of the work, though written, never fully materialized as it was lost at the hands of the poet Ramón de Palma (Luis 91). Still, it was the subject of a great amount of controversy that served to fuel the anti-slavery fire even more. Richard Madden refers to the first text as “the most perfect picture of Cuban slavery that has ever been given to the world” (cited in Luis 264) and relates that the second part “fell into the hands of persons connected with his former master, and I fear that it is not likely to be restored to the person to whom I am indebted to the first part” (264). In an attempt to authorize and establish the preeminence of the first part Madden declares that “[I]t is so full and faithful in its details, that it is difficult to imagine, that the portion which has been suppressed, can throw any greater light on the evils of this system, than the first part has done” (265).

For Madden, Manzano’s testimony is critical. He hyperbolizes the importance of the text and of Manzano as an individual, struggling for freedom within an oppressive system that Madden not only opposes but is trying to reform and eventually abolish. In the process, Manzano’s poetry is pushed to the background; his poems were never given nearly as much scrutiny as *Autobiografía*.

In fact, the only poem of Manzano’s that has received much commentary is his “Treinta años.” This testimonial poem was included in Madden’s *Poems of*

a *slave*, but is more famously known for Manzano's own reading of the text in one of Del Monte's *tertulia* meetings in 1836 (Luis 83, Labrador-Rodriguez 14). This emotionally charged reading inspired the charge to secure Manzano's manumission and added to his fame. Those that participated in purchasing his freedom included his former owner Don Nicolás Cárdenas and other members of the Del Monte circle. Again, it is the testimonial value of the reading by the "slave-poet" that gives fame to Manzano's work and thrusts him into the spotlight more as a subject of slavery than as a poet. The emphasis in the dichotomy is placed more heavily on "slave" rather than on "poet" and Manzano suffers a Barthes-like transformation to the level of myth and propaganda in Madden and Del Monte's hyperbolized anti-slavery/reformist discourse.

Since Manzano's narrative was the first of its kind, it stood as a model for the majority of Cuban writers of the nineteenth century. While William Luis points out that "Manzano's autobiography determined the direction in which the anti-slavery narrative would unfold" (40), he also notes that it is not the strength of his writing that makes him stand out as a model for this type of literature but the work's testimonial value.

With some variation, Manzano's life became a model for and a generator of narrative production. In some way, the emerging Cuban narrative was based on slavery; Manzano's life and writings would be repeated by other antislavery writers who would describe many of Manzano's characteristics in their works: a docile house servant; transference from the master's

house to the sugar mill, which allows the narrator to describe the evils of slavery and the unfair punishment of the slave protagonist. (39)

By producing a first-hand account of slavery, Manzano unknowingly shifted the focus that had grown around his literary production to his status as a slave subject. Instead of being Juan Francisco the “slave-poet”, he became Juan Francisco the “slave protagonist” and his life and circumstance took center stage as his popularity and notoriety soared. The power of his narrative overshadowed his poetic and dramatic production and, after being imprisoned and accused<sup>13</sup> of being involved in the Escalera Revolt of 1844, he ceased to write and faded from the public eye (Luis 92, Schulman 30, Azougarh 13, Paquette 234).

The text of his *Autobiografía* however, took on a life of its own, especially in more recent times. As stated previously, among the first to edit the text was Anselmo Suárez y Romero who corrected grammatical errors and syntax in an effort to make it more readable. It is speculated that this was the text that Del Monte circulated to members of his salon and turned over to Madden (Luis 83). The original text was lost for nearly a century until Franco located a manuscript in the National Archives in Havana. He also re-worked the text and published it in book form for the first time in 1937. Since then it has been re-edited again in Spanish by Franco in 1972, by Ivan Schulman in 1975, and in English by Edward Mullen in 1981. Luis contends that these revisions constitute a multi-layered

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<sup>13</sup> While it is not clear just exactly what if any participation Manzano had in the Escalera Revolt it is widely held that he was imprisoned under false pretenses through a case of mistaken identity that was added to through guilt by association. Paquette maintains that “[. . .] Manzano went to jail initially because his color and surname matched those of an accused conspirator and because he like Plácido, was a poet. He stayed there even longer because of his association with Domingo del Monte.” (234)

vision of Manzano's life and do not allow us to read the "original" manuscript which and "is not one but many texts" (99). The most recent revision of the text, edited by Abdeslam Azougarh in 2000, tries to take in to account this point of view and carefully stipulates that his version is

un cotejo de varios cuadernos manuscritos, algunos inéditos, periódicos y antologías del siglo XIX y XX. [ . . . ] Textos perdidos del siglo pasado. Por ello, aunque recoge la mayor cantidad posible de textos de Juan Francisco Manzano, este libro no puede asumir el calificativo de *Obras Completas*. (Azougarh 60)

Azougarh agrees with Luis that many editors have taken too many liberties with the text and is especially critical of Schulman's edition.

Además de reproducir los errores de Franco, Schulman agrega una que otra palabra, o incluso una oración, que no existen en el manuscrito autógrafo, ni por supuesto, en la transcripción de Franco. Cambia el orden de las oraciones, corrige la sintaxis y el léxico, omite palabras y a veces oraciones. (Azougarh 63)

In essence his conclusion is much like Luis' in *Literary Bondage* that these constant revisions constitute a re-writing of Manzano himself.

Suárez y Romero, Madden, Schulman, and Franco in their own way have attempted to rewrite Manzano's autobiography and turn Manzano into not the person he was but the person each editor thought he should have been. To a certain extent, there is a spiritual transference from Manzano

himself to Suárez y Romero, to Madden, to Franco and most recently, to Schulman, who writes the autobiography Manzano himself would have like to have written. The editors, as surely as slave masters, continue to mold and control Manzano's life . . . Like Del Monte, who wanted to help Manzano gain his freedom, Franco, Suárez y Romero, Schulman Calcagno and Madden in their own way assisted Manzano with his manuscript. But in doing so they have altered it. Each has written (or rewritten) Manzano's life to respond to a different time and a different reader. For just as Manzano had many masters while in slavery, in his passage into history the multiple editions continue to dominate and subjugate Manzano's writing. (99)

Also in agreement with Luis, Labrador-Rodríguez points out that while the early editing and revising of the text were common practice and represented a form of subaltern Creole power that would have otherwise been subjugated by the ever-present colonial system, it is the continuance of this editing and revision that sets it apart from other similar texts and makes Manzano an exceptional case that can be read on a variety of different levels (18).

Perhaps the most vocal critic of Manzano's editors is Cintio Vitier who concludes that Manzano's testimony loses power and efficacy in an anti-slavery discourse as the orthography, syntax and organization are changed to fit the needs of a particular public. For Vitier these changes belie the fact that Manzano's writing is the product of his own self-education within a system that



strictly prohibited slaves from being literate. He says “It is not the same to read his emotional *Autobiography* correctly written as it is with its errors. These shortcomings inspire respect, because they are not, strictly speaking shortcomings: they are like scars on his body” (cited in Schulman 29). Indeed, changing the nature of Manzano’s text is akin to changing the nature of the man himself. To correct his crude language, spelling and syntax to make it more sophisticated and less of “a chore to read” (Schulman 28) masks his past as a slave and takes away from the power of his education and subsequently from the power of his personal testimony and discourse. To ignore this counter grammar and focus solely on the discourse brought about by his numerous editors in which he appears first and most importantly as a slave is to ignore Manzano himself<sup>14</sup>. Also, as Jossianna Arroyo points out Manzano uses this mediation to further his discourse. As previously stated, Manzano refers to himself in a letter to Domingo Del Monte as “medio poeta”. Arroyo states the he does this because he realizes his exact positioning between the lettered society and the slave society surrounding him. In essence, he understands his “condición subalterna frente al mundo letrado” (65). Though he is not well educated, that does not mean he is unintelligent or even less intelligent than Del Monte and the other writers of the time period. In fact, this partiality makes him even all the more powerful as a writer, not for the fact that Del Monte helps in the production of his

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<sup>14</sup> For this purpose, in citing the works of Manzano I use whenever possible Franco’s 1972 edition of the texts, which maintains as closely as possible, the original spelling and orthography. For texts not found in this edition, I will use Azougarh’s 2000 edition.

text, but because Manzano understands that this mediation gives him authorial agency and voice.

La escritura de Manzano, intervenida por Del Monte produce, por consiguiente, esta mediación, donde la imitación o la falsificación se entrelaza con los saberes letrados. El situarse en “medio” como “medio escritor” es el gesto cultural y agencial de Manzano, por el cual se accede a los ejes constitutivos del sujeto literario en Cuba. (65)

Because he understands his subaltern position as a writer and because he allows his text to be manipulated to a certain extent by Del Monte he accomplishes both the goals of Del Monte’s discourse and his own quest for authorial agency. Though due to the intermediated nature of his *Autobiografía* we may be able to refer to Manzano as “medio escritor” it is clear that the emphasis of this dichotomy is more on the “escritor” than on the “medio” and his voice is not nearly as “reluctant” (Schulman 3) as it may at first appear – which is this key to his counter-discourse. As Schulman indicates, “the force of the master discourse – that of the hegemonic white oligarchy, Creole or Spanish – is indeed paramount” to understanding Manzano’s narrative. It is a discourse that is always present and though it shapes the nature of his text, Manzano is able to find enough slippage in the discourse and manipulate it enough so that when read between the lines of hegemony, his own voice and testimony as a slave and a black colonial subject within a plantation economy is clearly heard above the

hegemonic “white noise” of the Del Monte group’s white Creole and Spanish discourse.

In order to more fully appreciate Manzano’s texts and his discourse we must take a broader look at his life and his works as a whole, taking into account the fact that he was a slave but not over-emphasizing or hyperbolizing this fact in an attempt to authorize a separate discourse in and of itself. Analyzing his life as told in his *Autobiografía* in connection with his *Versos* and *Zafira* will let Manzano tell the story of his own life, not just as everyone wanted it to be but as he saw and wanted it to be told. It will reveal not only the obvious discourse that Del Monte solicited from him, but the more subtle and sophisticated plantation counter-discourse that encompasses a much larger spectrum of race, class and slavery in nineteenth century Cuba that through further critical consideration will bring us to a greater understanding of Manzano as an individual and as a writer.

## Chapter 2

### Manzano's Other "Autobiograph(ies)" *Versos* and *Zafira*

Heredia superó su clase por el idealismo romántico revolucionario [. . .] Plácido la ennoblecíó por su gracia [. . .] y Manzano la asumió como sufrimiento absoluto. – Cintio Vitier

To give critical credit where that credit is overdue, and to understand the impact of his work in his own milieu and ours, it is imperative to take into account the sum of Manzano's literary production, in which poetry predominates. [. . .] These other, less famous writings, particularly [. . .] *Zafira*, are crucial if frequently ignored tools towards a fuller understanding of the author as a complex figure embroiled in cultural and social negotiations that crisscrossed the Atlantic and unsettled the very institutions of Cuban slavery and colonial government. – Marilyn Grace Miller

### Introduction: Recording the Body; Writing the Soul –*Autobiografía* and *Versos*

Prior to the 1840 publication of *Autobiografía* in England Juan Francisco Manzano had already achieved a level of fame in Cuba as a poet and his poems had been published in various forms on the island. In fact, as Marilyn Miller points out, "Manzano had been a published author of poems some twenty years when his so-called autobiography was first printed" (50). His *Poesías líricas* and *Cantos a Lesbia* first appeared in Havana in 1821 and were followed by his *Flores pasajeras* [sic] (1830) and *Romances cubanos* (1834). Then, when Madden introduced his work to Europe with the publication in English translation

of *Poems of a Slave on the Island of Cuba*, he did for a time enjoy some measure of international renown. Although initially Del Monte found out about Manzano after reading his poetry, later his interest in the slave-poet focused primarily on the value of the Manzano's autobiographical testimony in Del Monte's anti-slavery/reformist efforts. So while it can certainly be argued that his intentions concerning Manzano were inherently altruistic – it was by his request after all that Madden included Manzano's poetry in his book and he maintained a vigorous correspondence with Manzano long after his manumission – in essence Del Monte recognized Manzano's usefulness and manipulated it for his own purposes. As such the relationship between Manzano and Del Monte can be read as part of a Hegelian master/slave dialectic in which Del Monte authored and authorized the text of the *Autobiografía* as much as did Manzano, explaining why it became a focal point of the Del Monte group's reformist and abolitionist discourse. Due to this early popularity and the impact it had in these early nineteenth century abolitionist campaigns and its continued textual relevance throughout the twentieth century, it is only obvious that *Autobiografía* has garnered the majority of the critical attention dedicated to the study of Manzano while his poetic works *Versos*<sup>15</sup> and his drama *Zafira* have largely been ignored and marginalized. In truth, while late twentieth century critical activity surrounding Manzano was focused on his formation as an important Afro-Cuban intellectual, very little had been said in detail about his literary production outside of his

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<sup>15</sup> See footnote 1.

*Autobiografía*. It is only in the twenty first century that new critical analyses of his poetic and dramatic contributions have been published.

As an author of multiple genres, Manzano was able to generate a certain amount of fame for himself, not because he was considered a brilliant poet, dramatist and narrator, but rather for the fact that he was a self-educated slave who wrote literary works. His *Autobiografía* is a product of this notoriety and may not have ever been written but for the insistence of Del Monte. In this chapter I show Manzano's contributions as a poet and playwright, comparing and contrasting his *Versos*<sup>16</sup> and his drama *Zafira* (1842) with his Del Monte-driven and influenced first-person narrative in *Autobiografía*, that will allow us to consider him not just a subject or phenomenon "outside of literature" (Echevarría 12) but as an accomplished intellectual and author as well.

One of the first things to take into account when analyzing Manzano as a slave is to point out that his situation is very different from that of many other slaves in his same predicament; thus he is very different as a writer than the other writers of his time. First, he is born into a life of relative privilege. He is personally ignorant of the harsh life of a slave until he is eleven years old and becomes the property of the Marchioness of Prado Ameno. Before this time, he lives and associates with his family and builds strong bonds, especially between his mother and his brother, though he comments that at times he does go years without seeing them. Very abruptly however this all changes when his new owner

takes control of his life and is determined to show him exactly how a slave should act. She is quick to point out that he has no control over his own life and that she is in charge of his destiny and fortune. They form a relationship in which Manzano is required to obey her exactly in the way she commands. In effect, he is not only a slave but an extension of her. The work Manzano performs as a slave reflects on her; her consciousness of this fact is reflected in the punishments she metes out to him. These punishments force Manzano to act according to her desires; his identity as an individual is now based on how he is able to serve his master and the quality of the service he provides. This relationship between owner and slave established in the text fits well within the description of Judith Butler's interpretation of Hegel's master/slave dialectic.

As the bondsman slaves away and becomes aware of his own signature on the things that he makes, he recognizes in the form of the artifact that he crafts the markings of his own labor, markings that are formative of the object itself. His labor produces a visible and legible set of marks in which the bondsman reads back from the object a confirmation of his own formative activity. This labor, this activity, which belongs from the start to the lord, is nevertheless reflected back to the bondsman as his own labor, a labor that emanates from him, even if it appears to emanate from the lord... the bondsman thus belongs to the lord, but with a kind of belonging that cannot be avowed, for to avow the belonging would be to avow the substitution and hence, to expose the lord as being the body which the

lord apparently very much does not want to be. Hence, it is as a substitute in the service of disavowal that the bondsman labors; only by miming and covering the mimetic status of that labor can the bondsman appear to be both active and autonomous. (36 - 37)

In this same type of relationship, Manzano serves his owner through a sense of self-identification. In the same way, as a writer he is subject to the same kind of dichotomy between himself, Del Monte and those who have endeavored to edit his texts. Indeed he falls into the same category of colonial subjectivity that Homi Bhabha describes in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," the fourth chapter of his book *The Location of Culture*. As colonial subjects and as slaves, the participants in this type of relationship are actually only mimicking their masters and can never become an exact reflection of their master's desires. Instead, as we see in Manzano, both in his relationship with the Marchioness of Prado Ameno and with his many editors, as an author he will remain in a permanent state of "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86). In Bhabha's approximation Manzano would fall into this category of mimicry because there will always remain in his discourse a sense of ambivalence, a difference that must be highlighted in order for it to be effective.

What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a



'partial' presence. By 'partial' I mean both 'incomplete' and 'virtual'. It is as if the very emergence of the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition *within* the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace (86)

Manzano's texts represent this very kind of discursive "slippage" to which Bhabha refers. They are always only a partial representation of the controlling discourse and *almost but not quite* like the other texts and poetry associated with the Del Monte circle, or for that matter, other romantic Cuban poetry of the day. Manzano's writing has always been a mimetic process. Just as learning to write by copying his master's handwriting will never allow him to appropriate the same or provide an exact copy, his discourse will also never become the same as the dominant discourse in which his literary master's participate. Whether he is composing *décimas* he fashions after the religious ceremonies he attends or writing his autobiography, his writing will always remain a mimicry, a facsimile that can never possibly appropriate all the enunciative possibilities the original discourse lays out. What copying his master's handwriting and his literary master's discourses does do however is provide a point of departure from theirs, a starting point where Manzano can write and tell his own story from his unique racial and social perspectives. Though it appears to be the same discourse as the white, reformist delmontino discourse, because of the nature of his racial

heritage, it will always be ambivalent; a “white” text written by a black slave. But this is what gives his discourse its salient sense of autonomy. As Bhabha puts it, rather than being considered *almost but not quite* writing, as his own voice testifies of his colonial experience and successfully mimics the delmontino discourse it will now always be considered “*almost the same but not white*” (91) writing. This is where Manzano’s discourse gains its efficacy as a plantation counter-discourse and where he finds his only true freedom. As Bhabha explains, “the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction,” (89) and Manzano’s discourse is under interdiction in its very nature. He is unable to tell his story with the openness he desires; his writing cannot supersede his status as a slave or colonial subject and it cannot surpass the bounds for which Del Monte sets for it as evidenced by the missing manuscript of the second part of his autobiography. As Paquette asserts, this second part was lost

perhaps conveniently under the political pressure of the day, by Ramón de Palma [. . .] Students of Manzano might be right in thinking that the second part reveals a more honest and aggressive Manzano on slavery, one less restrained by the inferred guidelines of Del Monte and his followers, who thought the portrayal of servile and degraded slaves more appropriate for their purposes. (110)

Unlike the other writers associated with the Del Monte circle Manzano has to write between the lines of their hegemony and illustrate his subjectivity as a person as well as a writer. As Julio Ramos establishes in his article “The Law is

Other: Literature and the Constitution of the Juridical Subject in Nineteenth Century Cuba,” *Autobiografía* is an overt testimonial attempt to establish Manzano’s rights as an author and juridical subject, and as such, has to follow certain guidelines that establish his rights and freedom. As Ramos asserts, “with remarkable narrative skill” (10) Manzano tells of how his mistress has essentially robbed him of his inheritance, a sum that would have purchased his manumission. Upon his mother’s death Manzano records that he was sent to the plantation “el Molino” to pick up his mother’s things, which contained among other things a list of debts owed to his mother. Manzano records: “allé tambien un lio de papeles q<sup>e</sup> testificaban barías deudas abiendo entre ellos uno de dosientos y pico de pesos y otro de cuatrosientos y tantos pesos estos debian cobrarse a mi señora” (Franco 37). When he brings up the subject of the debt to his mistress however, she first ignores him, then denies him the payment as she claims that she is “heredera forzosa de sus esclavos” (38) and that if he brings up the subject again that she will put him “donde no beas el sol ni la luna” (38). And in a truly juridical fashion, Manzano records the time and location that this last conversation occurred with his mistress as he then says “esta escena pasó en la sala del Sor. Dn. Felis Quintero, serian las onse de la mañana” (38). For Ramos, this usurpation is the ultimate source of legitimacy for Manzano’s testimony, and brings power to his discourse.

In a clear inversion of roles, this usurpation moves the figure of authority to the position of transgressor [. . .] The master's transgression, (the theft) is the secret that legitimates the slave's written testimony, his appearance in the presence of a different mode of judgement. (Ramos 11)

Because of this, Ramos concludes that Manzano's writings, both in lyrical poetry and in testimonial narrative constitute a legitimizing discourse. His testimony is a form of writing that "became a key domain for the processing of new forms of subjectivity" (11). In essence he takes the strict hegemonic discourse of his master's and finds, within the play of this discourse, a new interdictory space that is autonomous, unique and powerful. Ramos concludes:

Manzano mimetically appropriates this other mode of writing from the world of the masters. For this he is punished, but it also opens the way for his manumission, and results in a degree of legal autonomy for him. This other mode of writing leads him to Del Monte's circle, making him a property owner even prior to his manumission, and subsequently situating him – within the very testimony we read – before a new mode of judgement found precisely on the individual's basic rights to his own body. [. . .] On his skin, the slave bears the signs of the law's injustice, the visible evidence on the which his challenge is based, and which authorizes the alternative truth pronounced by his testimony. (11)

Writing becomes Manzano's only true avenue to freedom, but cautiously so; he only achieves a sense of autonomy by mimicking the controlling discourse

of his master's and twisting it to carve out his own niche. This is the source of his need to write autobiographically; his testimony in verse and in narrative allows him to enter into another form of appropriation that legitimizes and establishes his autonomy and freedom. It is his own self-education that creates a condition where he can appropriate himself as a subject; he is a slave who can and does write about the conditions of slavery. However, because of this same fact, his interdictory plantation counter-discourse has been overlooked and ignored. The fame garnered from his situation posits him as a subject within the structure of the dominant discourse of early nineteenth century Cuba and, in its necessity to rapidly dispense a hyperbolized propaganda, the reformist looks only at the portion of Manzano's discourse that mimics its own. As such, Manzano is remembered more for his condition as a subject rather than for his skill as a founder of discourse. He gains his freedom as a consequence of his mimicry rather than for the ambivalence it presents. The first casualty of this misappropriation is the very source of his original fame and legal claim to freedom, his poetry.

### ***Versos*: A More Perfect Witness – Manzano's Poetic Discourse**

Though he is remembered as a slave-poet, Manzano's poetry has largely been overlooked by his critics. His *Versos*, as Franco titles them, constitute a scattered collection of poems published in a variety of different mediums, which Azougarh has attempted to compile through extensive research. To date, Azougarh's version is the most comprehensive and complete collection in one

volume though, as stipulated previously, cannot be considered “obras completas” (60). Admittedly, the lack of such a compilation may be part of the reason why his poetry has been overlooked even when seven of his more poignant poems are found in Franco’s 1937 and subsequent 1972 editions. Also, just as in Avellaneda’s case, much of the criticism surrounding Manzano’s poetry focuses on the aspects of Romanticism that are found in the texts and altogether ignore the larger discourse that springs from them. In his own assessment of Manzano’s poetry Azougarh summarizes that “para Manzano la poesía es romántica” (33) but that Manzano’s use of Romanticism in his poetry – both during and after Manzano’s lifetime – drew unnecessarily negative criticism that has served to marginalize these texts. To illustrate this, he cites the assessment of Max Henríquez Ureña who is very critical of Manzano’s poetic style and does not recognize the fact that, for Manzano, obedience in appearance to the prevalent romantic aesthetic was the only legitimate way he could present his story in verse. For Henríquez Ureña, Manzano’s verses “no pasan de balbuceos, más o menos felices, sorprendentes, eso sí, en quien solo por su voluntad y personal esfuerzo logró salir de la ignorancia” (Henríquez Ureña 184). To counter this opinion Azougarh points out that:

La crítica literaria en general se ha contentado con algunos pocos textos para fijar su espacio dentro de la letras cubanas [. . .]. Se ha enfatizado su actitud sumisa ante la institución esclavista y su imitación dócil de la estética romántica, cuando en realidad la queja de su yo lírico es una

queja del esclavo que no siempre puede referir directamente la esclavitud a no ser con expresiones eufemísticas. (34)

For the most part, the criticism surrounding Manzano's poetry offers little more than a superficial readings of the texts that do not take into account his interdictory status as a subject nor that, in the first place, he did not have the right to be literate and, as such, had to codify his verses to conform to the mode of representation available to him at the time.

El romanticismo en el caso de Manzano, como lo ha señalado Cintio Vitier, "responde a una verdadera necesidad." Los límites que le imponen su condición y la censura de la época solo le permitieron escribir versos que aparentemente cantan el sueño, el amor, la belleza estética. Sus visions románticas responden a un impulso compensatorio. (Azougarh 52)

Manzano had no other option but to style his texts according to the dictates of Romanticism; it was how he learned poetry to begin with. This however should not take away from the value of the poetry itself; mimicking Romanticism, as my reading will show, serves to enhance its richness and strengthen the character of his discourse.

Because he was unable to refer directly to his condition as a slave in his poetry, Manzano's poems are often much more complex than a casual first reading allows to be seen. For Manzano poetry is an escape from the cruel realities of his situation in which he attains, even if fleetingly so, a sense of autonomy over his own life. It was the one thing his masters and mistresses

could not take away from him. Even when it was strictly forbidden he comments that the prohibition was “en vano todo se abian de acostar y entonces encendia mi cabito de bela y me desquitaba a mi gusto copiando las mas bonitas letrillas de Arriaza a quien imitando siempre me figuraba q<sup>e</sup>, con pareserme a él ya era poeta o sabia aser versos” (31) and that he always had “un cuaderno de versos en la memoria” (12). Even from the earliest age he considers himself a poet and establishes his testimony through his poetry. He cannot help being autobiographical in his poetic writing and this is a theme that repeats itself constantly in his verses.

Pues sus poemas en gran parte conforman su autobiografía en verso, claro que sin la sistematización de la que escribió en prosa a pedido de Del Monte. Islotes autobiográficos muchos de estos poemas, donde lo que se cuenta, a ráfagas, apresa señales hondas de la vida del cantor, pero deja en penumbra varias identidades. (Azougarh 46)

In my analysis I will look at two of his poems that deal with these autobiographical themes and can be compared side by side with episodes from his *Autobiografía* they can also be compared also with the depiction of the plantation life that Avellaneda describes through the voice of Sab to Enrique. In particular I will look at “Treinta años”, and “La visión del poeta compuesta en un ingenio de fabricar azúcar”. Though there are many poems that qualify as “islotes autobiográficos”, these in particular relate most directly to the narrative texts and

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best relate Manzano's struggle against his personal oppression. These poems conform to the hegemonic standards of the type of romantic poetry that was then being produced in Cuba. Yet, at the same time, reveal the sophisticated and carefully crafted way he describes his existence as a participant in Benitez-Rojo's "ciclo fatal de la plantación" which is precisely what establishes his own interdictory plantation counter-discourse.

As stated previously, "Treinta años" is the poem that first incites sentiment towards Manzano's and inspires the collection for his manumission. It is a short sonnet but full of powerful imagery of a cruel and miserable life. Never once, however, is slavery overtly mentioned nor is the subject ever referred to as a slave in the text. This information is only inferred through the context of Manzano as a slave-poet and author of his narrative autobiography. The poem cannot be completely understood without the backdrop of the *Autobiografía*. Only upon knowing he is a slave-poet can one understand the code he uses to refer to slavery. The first stanza is reflective of his whole life and could serve as an introduction to his *Autobiografía*.

Cuando miro el espacio que he corrido

Desde la cuna hasta el presente día,

Tiemblo, y saludo a la fortuna mía

Más de terror que de atención movido (Azougarh 201)

The first two lines remind us that his whole life has not been a life of his own but "el espacio que he corrido" – a time/space reference that does not belong to him

but to which he has been assigned, and has been forced to travel through. This is reinforced in the penultimate line in the phrase “la fortuna mía” which refers to his status as a slave. Fate and destiny are in control of him instead of himself as subject/poet. The addition of the words “tiemblo” and “terror” immediately bring in the images of his suffering as a young man at the hands of his mistress, La Marchioness de Prado Ameno. With the context of *Autobiografía* in mind, we are reminded of his adolescent fear of rats when confined in the cellar, the constant barrage of bloody noses, the beatings he received for stealing, the horrific accident in the purging room, and the scar on his head that never fully heals. This writing of the body in pain constitutes part of a strategy of what Arroyo calls “el travestismo cultural” (71) and makes Manzano “un nuevo sujeto del la escritura” (70). She further explains that as he is physically punished often for reciting verses and poems because “[l]a oralidad [. . .] es vista como un exceso por sus amos y tiene que ser disciplinada. Un esclavo que habla bien [. . .] es visto como figura amenazante” (72). Because of this, Manzano changes his attitude towards his excessive orality and internalizes it to the space of memory, causing him to become melancholic and untrusting of those around him which eventually serves to transform his poetry into a new interdictory discourse that imitates that of the romantic poets of his time.

Manzano imita el carácter de los poetas románticos e incorpora la memoria como la estrategia principal de su escritura. Por consiguiente, la escritura le servirá para re-elaborar su cuerpo e inscribir la cultura como

“gesto”. Manzano se inscribe en un lugar intermedio del discurso: el de la voz (exceso-oralidad) y la letra (melancolía-represión). (72)

In this light we can see how that this melancholic “discurso intermedio” then transforms “el espacio que he corrido” into a veritable living hell that undoubtedly spawned such a terrific emotional reaction when read in Del Monte’s “tertulia” in 1837.

The next stanza reinforces this imagery and gives the poet a voice as he comments on how these first thirty years have affected him.

Sopréndeme la lucha que he podido

Sostener contra suerte tan impía

Si tal puede llamarse la porfía

De mi infelice ser, al mal nacido

Though he has been destined to have been born a slave, (“mal nacido”) and to live as an “infelice ser”, he has been able to persist through it all, fighting against fortune (“suerte tan impía”), and to attain a certain nobility, an air of confidence that has helped somehow surprisingly (“sorpréndeme”) make it through “la lucha que he podido sostener”. He marvels at how he has made it this far through such terrible circumstances. We get the feeling that, though it has been difficult, he has persevered and will continue doing so. This stanza fills us, however, with a false hope. Just as his autobiography records the emotional highs and lows he experienced throughout his life in seeking his manumission and freedom, we are led to believe, as he was, that he would one day be free and equal to his

masters. The third stanza confirms this pattern of highs and lows, or, more correctly, lows and more lows, as he proclaims:

Treinta años ha que conocí la tierra

Treinta años ha que en gemidor estado

Triste infortunio por do quier me asalta (201)

Again he posits himself as a victim of fate that “assaults” him on every side and turns his life into a state of suffering – thirty years of suffering. At thirty years old, we would expect him to have much life left in him, but when coupled with the difficult life outlined in *Autobiografía*, he suddenly ages as we realize that to him, his thirty years have been much longer than the equivalent years of a free person and we are left to wonder and realize just how long thirty years can be. The final stanza affirms his state of hopelessness as he proclaims:

Mas nada es para mí la cruda guerra

que en vano suspirar he soportado,

si la calculo ¡Oh Dios! con la que falta (201)

The testimony here of his first thirty years hyperbolizes Manzano’s life in a truly romantic fashion. There is a definite feeling of exalted emotion, as his cry “¡Oh Dios!” indicates. Also the images he creates by coupling adjectives that denote abstract emotion (i.e. “cruda”, “impía” “triste” “terror” “infelice”, ) with agonistic nouns that are coded to hide his status as slave and Afro-Caribbean subject (“fortuna”, “suerte”, “infortunio” “lucha”) denote a brand of suffering unique to him that can only truly be understood in context with the text of his

*Autobiografía*. If the next thirty years are anything like his first thirty, then there truly is no hope for him, nor is there for a society that has created such a subject and situation. Here then do we first witness the skill of Manzano as a poet. He has created a poem that, though it never mentions slavery overtly decries it blatantly while at the same time bolsters his own personal status as a juridical subject. His poem transcends the limits of all the discourses in which it participates, Romanticism, autobiography and anti-slavery. In essence he has taken the dominant discourses and mimicked them *inter dicta* – not rupturing the discourses, but de-centering them slightly – to make room for his own unique description of Cuban subjectivity that only a slave-poet could provide, allowing us to identify the existence of a plantation counter-discourse in his poetry.

Another highly romantically charged poem that accomplishes this same feat is the powerful “La visión del poeta compuesta en un ingenio de fabricar azúcar”, a title with obvious Caribbean significance. Here Manzano is relaying the horrors of plantation life that he experienced from time to time at the plantation el Molino. These horrors played an even bigger part in his imagination as he was often sent there by his mistress as a punishment. Knowing the visceral reaction this created in her slave she used the threat of sending him there time and time again as a disciplinary and manipulative tool which, because of his vivid imagination, in and of itself was a veritable torture for Manzano. Though many examples abound, to see just how much this threat meant to him in his *Autobiografía*, I refer to the episode in which he is awakened by a crowing

rooster before the normal hour. Worried that it might wake his mistress he gets up and scares it off. His only comment about the situation is “esto fue motivo p<sup>r</sup>. q<sup>e</sup>. si no buscase con tiempo al señor Don Tomás Gener p<sup>r</sup> padrino, ubiera ido a aprender a madrugar al Molino” (Manzano 34). In this poem we are looking directly into his unconscious to see the scenarios that played out in his mind over and over again with each threat. His vision of the “ingenio” is much like Sab’s in that the ultimate result we see is that of death, which is apparent from the first stanza.

Cuando en la cima allá de un alto pino  
Para morir el ruiseñor se advierte  
Se postra a saludar con triste himno  
Aquel postrar instante de su muerte (Azougarh 158)

The metaphor of the dying cry of the mockingbird sets an ominous tone for the rest of the poem. Like the bird, the slave is destined to die in misery and suffering, and, though it sounds like singing, it is a mournful, foreboding cry.

Y doliente del mísero destino  
Celebrar él mismo tan funesta suerte,  
Y aparenta que canta, pero llora  
El terrible dolor que le devora. (158)

Again we see Manzano using a collection of adjectives with negative connotations modifying abject nouns to convey a somber image of death that hangs over the plantation (“triste himno”, “funesta suerte” “postrar instante de su muerte” “terrible dolor”). In the next stanza, the focus shifts as the autobiographical voice appropriates the cry of the mocking bird and sings the presages of his misery and subsequent death. He is mourning himself, and is “testigo, de un daño que me viene amenazando” (158). Just as in “Treinta años,” there is no mention of the slave or slavery; up to this point the only mention of the plantation system we have is from the striking title. The poem was written in the sugar mill itself and through the *Autobiografía* we know what this constant threat means to the young Manzano. The poet represents his autobiographical subject in this poem as the pilot of the ship in the middle of a desperate and violent storm from which there is no hope of escape:

Así el piloto en la iracunda saña  
De la terrible mar embravecida,  
Discreto toma del timón la caña  
Para salvar su nave ya perdida.  
Mas si es inútil toda fuerza o maña,  
Y su esperanza mira destruida,  
Vano es pensar los males repeler;  
Que no hay grande alma contra gran poder (159)

The pilot of the ship finds his only salvation through minding the tiller however, ironically so, his ship is already lost. Very subtly, he has posited the poetic voice as a slave working in the sugar factory and the only mention of the plantation, aside from the title, is the simple word “caña”. Though not to be taken literal, the word is used as a pun and as such is very significant. The beautiful and sophisticated metaphor developed in the above stanza is that of a lost sea captain whose ship is damned to a certain disaster. As much as he turns the wheel, the more he is bound to become lost; for every turn of the wheel that “processes the cane”, a part of the slave’s soul is taken from him by this “gran poder” that is the master. The next images we see transition the subject from the metaphoric imagery to a very literal representation of the “trapiche” that processes the cane. This explicit reference situates the poem in a very Caribbean setting within an economy that can only be sustained through slavery. Through poetic testimony we see a vision of intense plantation labor and heat that, like Sab, Manzano describes as a living hell.

Contemplo aquí los pálidos aspectos  
Del sin ventura suelo donde habito  
Y circúndanme en torno mil objetos  
Que por doquier aumentan mi conflicto.  
El escabroso monte en esqueletos,  
Su adustez, y espectáculo inaudito  
Parece estar gimiendo en una urna



Con su naturaleza taciturna

[. . .]

Vieras el gran trapiche crujir, dando

Octogónicas vueltas que no enfrena

Con cien muelas de bronce devorando

Cuanto en su boca pone en que la llena;

Y luego por sus pies bajar manando

El jugo de la caña en gruesa vena

Que va lenta marchando con blandura

Donde ha de convertirse en piedra dura

[. . .]

Si a la vista tuvieras los cantones

Que redoblan mis penas y amargura,

Creieras ver del Etna los fogones

Que abrasan de Tifeo el alma dura

No se sienten aquí campestres cones,

Ni de cantoras aves la dulzura,

Ni un momento se pasa de alegría

Siendo la noche semejante al día.

[. . .]

Tal me figuro estar en lo profundo,

Do está Satán en su destierro eterno,

Cuyas cavernas son en aquel mundo

Recinto infausto del horrendo infierno.

Igual en todo este lugar inmundo

A las soturnas cuevas del averno (160 – 161)

If in his autobiography Manzano makes it clear that the ultimate punishment that could be inflicted on him is being sent to the sugar mill at El Molino, these verses crystallize this point and reveal just how deeply affected he is by this threat. Though these images are hyperbolized through a strong romantic aesthetic, Manzano uses this to his advantage. And though this was written well before Del Monte requested his autobiography, he creates a metaphor that allows him to subtly say what he will not be able to in the more overt narrative style. It allows him to editorialize about his life to bolster his testimony. These autobiographical themes are prevalent throughout much of his poetry and though I do not explore them all in detail here, they certainly merit much more critical scrutiny and analysis as they reveal not only Manzano's interdictory discourse, but prove his skill as a poet and intellectual.

As Azougarh points out, Manzano has been considered a literary figure for many of the wrong reasons. His work has been included in the canon because of its testimonial power and because it is the first of its kind in Latin America. Unlike other authors his writing has not been necessarily judged on its merits but has been included in the canon because it exists and as such his poetry has been under-evaluated and overlooked.

No podemos considerar el conjunto de su obra como reliquias poéticas muy del siglo XIX cubano, ni como textos disparatados, llenos de faltas de ortografía, testimonios de un inculto esclavo con ínfulas de poeta. Se ha ido demasiado lejos en esto de la incultura de Manzano. Se ha medido la posesión idiomática real por la cacografía; el don poético, por la retórica; el aliento del poeta, por el millón de versos. Y sin embargo, cuando se leen sus versos *desde la poesía* se comprueba que Manzano podría tener un lugar entre los poetas más intensos y misteriosos de la lírica cubana. [. . .] Él cumplió su destino de poeta. (44-45)

### **Si “Sab c’est moi”, entonces yo soy Zafira: Manzano’s Drama**

Perhaps the most ignored and enigmatic of all of Manzano's work is his drama *Zafira*. Written sometime around 1842<sup>17</sup>, the play is not set in nineteenth century Cuba nor the Caribbean, but in sixteenth century Mauritania (present day Algiers). Though the role of slaves in the play proves to be significant, its plot does not center around a slave tragedy or on its face does it seem to pertain at all to any anti-slavery discourse. Because of this, there is very little criticism available as it does not appear to fit within the parameters the better known part of Manzano's work sets forth. Recently however, critics have begun to take note of this play and the important contributions it makes. Most notable are the articles written by Marilyn Miller who has taken a special interest in the play, recognizing that it indeed constitutes “a rich substrate of social, aesthetic, and political

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<sup>17</sup> See footnote 2.

intrigue” (51) and is definitely worthy of much more careful scholarship and critical dedication.

In her analysis of *Zafira* Miller notes that while the play has been virtually ignored for over a century and half, at the time of its writing it was “broadly extolled at the moment of its publication” (53) and was considered particularly noteworthy among the members of the Del Monte circle, who, again lead by Del Monte himself, arranged and financed its publication through subscriptions just as they did for Manzano’s manumission.

The play’s appearance was heralded in the Cuban press, its writing represented an early milestone in the development of a ‘minority’<sup>18</sup> literature in the island, and its setting, however remote in time and geography, was read – at least by some – in relation to the contemporary crisis in Cuba. As Roberto Friol confirms, *Zafira* was published thanks to a *subscripción* that pooled funds of more than 300 people, many of high social and intellectual status. While their motives and the degree of their support may have varied, all of these patrons viewed the text as a worthwhile contribution to Cuban social and/or intellectual life. (51-52)

In spite of this early notoriety, *Zafira* virtually disappeared soon after its publication. There is no known record of it ever being produced theatrically and the original manuscript has never been found (54). While this disappearance alone leaves many questions surrounding this work unanswered, what

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<sup>18</sup> Miller is careful to point out the ironic use of the term “minority” here as the reality of 1840’s Cuba was that “approximately 60% of the population in the island was black or mulatto” (52).

complicates matters and creates even more questions surrounding Manzano's "enigma" (Azougarh 57, Friol 68, Miller 54) is Miller's recent discovery of an earlier Spanish play with that same title that undoubtedly provided the source for Manzano's play.

The presence of an earlier Spanish text titled *Zafira* leaves us with a new set of questions: were copies of the text circulating in Spain and/or Cuba in the first half of the nineteenth century? Was the work staged in either or both places, and if so when, how, and how often? Did Manzano read the text, see the play or perhaps just hear about it? How does the play's discovery give support to or alternately challenge criticism of Manzano as an imitative poet, as a mere copier or parrot of the literary models fashionable in his day? Many of these riddles may be impossible to solve fully, but one thing becomes patently clear from a side-by-side examination of the two texts: it is no coincidence that the two works are titled *Zafira*; Manzano was at the least very aware of the Spanish work and its basic setting and cast of characters. (54)

As Miller's work goes on to convincingly identify and trace the similarities between the original Spanish text and Manzano's re-writing it is obvious, as she asserts, that Manzano knew this text well enough to see the possibilities it presented to him. As Miller poses in her series of questions, this could open up further negative criticism against Manzano causing critics to again question his creative abilities and limit his contributions to mere imitation, as was the

contention of Henríquez Ureña and Rine Leal (58). However, a more detailed reading of *Zafira* that takes into account Manzano's status as a slave and colonial subject, a broader understanding of Cuba's political situation in the 1830's, and the actual history behind the fictitious events of the play reveals that Manzano's knowledge of the text serves to make his *Zafira* a much more intelligent and sophisticated offering than a simple imitation ever could. Manzano takes this earlier text and re-writes it very strategically and subtly to create a work that though it appears to be speaking of events that happened in sixteenth century Northern Africa when they are in essence detailing the political and social circumstances of 1830's Cuba. As previously analyzed Manzano cannot help from autobiographical here and sees in the framework of the original text, an opportunity to tell his own story. Just as he does in his poetry, he writes himself into the drama through a variety of characters and circumstances. In this light, *Zafira* can be considered an autobiographical text that re-writes and re-appropriates the dominant anti-slavery discourse to give voice to a wider variety of issues facing Manzano and the Afro-Cuban subject. This Cuban specificity in turn further propels Manzano's own plantation counter-discourse and as such it is a text that deserves more critical consideration

Without a careful and detailed reading or understanding of the play's historical context, *Zafira* is a drama that does not appear in any way to mirror Manzano's life or nineteenth century Cuban society at all. It is the story of Zafira, an Arabian princess whose husband Selim has been slain unbeknownst to her by

the usurping Barbarroja. Her son, also named Selim, has been forced into exile and with the absence of an apparent heir Zafira is confronted with the possibility of marriage to Barbarroja as a peaceable solution to his invasion. However, Barbarroja's brother Issac proposes to betray his brother and take Zafira to her father's kingdom in Mustigia. Her son Selim however returns to the city soon discovers Barbarroja's plot. Eventually he challenges Barbarroja to a duel and wins, but not before Barbarroja's servant Danmey lies to Zafira that her son has been killed, showing her a bloody turban she believes to be Selim's, and in her agony kills herself. Upon seeing his mother's death, Selim ultimately abdicates his kingdom as it has caused so much pain to him and done so much damage to his family. Though on its face *Zafira* may not appear to be autobiographical, a closer analysis reveals – as we have seen in Manzano's other works – that he is always in some way writing about himself.

In the conclusion of the introduction to his edition of Manzano's works, Azougarh briefly summarizes his review of them as such: "Autobiografismo lírico, autobiografía en prosa, autobiografismo epistolar y luego *Zafira*, de no escasos tintes también autobiográficos" (60). In the case of the latter, he refers to two instances in which Manzano speaks autobiographically through his characters and while Azougarh mentions them only very briefly, citing a single passage from the eunuch slave Noemí – who is the most obvious choice for and autobiographical identification – and a passage from Selim's soliloquy just before he is to duel with Barbarroja adding that that the passage could very well be

considered a continuation of “Treinta años”. While I agree with this interpretation, their autobiographical implications go much further than Azougarh suggests and both characters are worthy of a deeper analysis.

From the beginning of the play it is not readily apparent that the character Noemí is a character of consequence as he speaks few words and seems to be a very static character. As a slave he is obedient and faithful to his mistress Zafira and for the most part is appears to just follow orders. As Miller notes however, he is a creation unique to Manzano and did not appear in the earlier Spanish version of the play. In Manzano’s version however, his role is significant. First he is mainly used as an important vehicle of communication between Zafira and Selim while the latter is in disguise and in hiding. He is very loyal to his former master Selim the father, and serves in relative happiness. He is steady, noble and devout, with “una alma ardiente y compasiva” (Azougarh 244<sup>19</sup>). Clearly Noemí’s character does not provide a testimony of suffering in slavery as Manzano does in his *Autobiografía*. Though he may be a bondsman, his soul is free and he serves with a quiet dignity and a dedication that is more than a mere sense of duty or obligation. He does much more than follow orders, his actions denote a sense of agency as he serves willingly – he chooses to serve rather than being forced to do so. Noemí’s relationship with his former master Selim could best be characterized as equivalent to Manzano’s relationship with Don

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<sup>19</sup> Previously I have attempted to quote as much of Manzano’s words as possible from Franco’s 1973 edition of *Obras* in order to maintain the integrity of the original orthography and spelling (see footnote 4). However, in the case of *Zafira* there has been no effort to maintain the original errors in the Franco edition. Because of this, I will use Azougarh’s more recent 2000 edition.



Nicolás de Cárdenas, to whom Manzano was always loyal and served willingly as he records in *Autobiografía*: “pero a pesar de esta orden fui a despedirme de ellos, el Sor. Dn Nicolás, q<sup>e</sup> desde bien chico me queria, con mis servicios me lo avía acabado de ganar” (Manzano 33). Noemí serves Selim in this same way; when the younger Selim offers to pay him for helping him escape from the palace, he refuses to accept the money.

Soy superior en todo a la fortuna,  
Mas tesoro no quiero, yo la canto  
Según la encuentro, próspera o adversa  
Y así de sus caprichos nada extraño. (Azougarh 243)

Noemí's service as a communicator and the way he communicates to Selim here and the results of this communication cannot go overlooked as it is a direct autobiographical comparison to Manzano. At this point in the play Selim's life is in danger at the hands of Isaac and Noemí's warning – sung to him in a song – saves his life. As Miller notes

Whereas in the earlier version of *Zafira*, Selim owes his salvation to Spanish soldiers, here his life is saved, repeatedly, by a slave. Ironically, it is a slave who had earlier 'freed' Selim from the clutches of the murderous Barbarroja, and it is no another slave – this one identified as Black – who will 'liberate' him once more, not with arms necessarily but with strategy

and a song (which he also uses later on to protect Zafira from Barbarroja's unwelcome advances). (60)

Noemí serves his masters through the use of words – but not just spoken words – songs; words in verse. In essence: poetry. Could the same be said then about Manzano's poetry? Could they indeed in his own perception be an extension of his service, at least on a symbolic level? If they are we need to take into account the way in which Noemí uses these songs to serve his masters, he does so willingly – acting as an agent of his own choosing and not out of a sense of forced obligation confined by ownership. Going beyond the bounds of servitude his actions as a slave transgress the law of the master/slave dialectic and as they are freely given constitute an act of freedom on Noemí's part. In the same way, Manzano's own songs – his verses – establish his own freedom. Unlike the mediated text of his *Autobiografía*, his poetry represents the only freedom and property he is permitted – the freedom to think and to have ideas. The exercise of this freedom breaks him from the tethers of the master/slave dialectic, making his poetry that much more valuable and pertinent.

If anything, Noemi represents Manzano's idealization of how a slave should act and feel about his servitude to a good master and his words in the warning song to Selim reflect Manzanos's own sentiments about his service to Don Nicolás. More than that however, the wording Noemí uses and the way communicates to Selim echoes how Manzano described the freedom words and

poetry gave him in the middle of his servitude as Miller notes in her analysis of the same passage.

The language [. . .] bears a notable resemblance to Manzano's declaration that it was his poetry that provided him with a means and a mode in which to recount situations that were 'ya próspera, ya adversa.' His status as a poet proved he had a soul and was more than the sum of the circumstances in which he found himself. The subtext of slavery and the individual's response to it thus takes center stage in Manzano's *Zafira*, though the topic was of little or no concern to his Spanish predecessor.

(60)

As Miller illustrates here, we see again that Manzano inserts his own subjectivity into the re-writing of this play in a way that goes beyond mimesis and creates a dynamic and revealing slave character in Noemí. Like Manzano as a poet and writer on his autobiography, he is a bearer of words that bring freedom and is also a direct reflection of parts of his own life, specifically the more prosperous (ya próspera) and happy ones. Not only does Noemí serve faithfully as a slave – like Manzano assures he did – Noemí's master also treats him well, just as Don Nicolás and the Count and Countess of Jibacoa did to Manzano, during one of the few happy periods in his life. On this episode, Manzano comments:

con esta ama mi felisidad iva cada dia en mas aumento, asiendo q<sup>e</sup> se me guardase en el numero de su familia las mas pulidas consideraciones y mi

señor por lo tanto la imitaba biendome esmerarme en darle gusto en el cumplimiento de mis obligaciones. (Manzano 32)

As this passage reflects one of the few fond remembrances of Manzano's life we are again reminded that the figure of Noemí as a slave mirrors only the parts of his life that Manzano remembers as "felicidad" and is a stark contrast to the figure of Selim the younger. As Azougarh mentions when he comments that Selim's soliloquy could be an extension of "Mis treinta años", he is a character who mirrors the darker suffering Manzano portrayed throughout *Autobiografía*.

As Selim returns to Mauritania incognito, he finds that his mother is betrothed to his father's murderer and potential usurper Barbarroja. The marriage will effectively give Barbarroja control of the kingdom, and Zafira feels she has no other recourse and has agreed to the union, partly because she believes her son, the heir to the throne, is dead. Selim's story is one of a fractured family. The figure of his murdered father has long since been gone from his life and he has been separated from his mother violently and abruptly, fleeing to preserve his existence. Now, he is returning to re-establish his family and assume the throne that is rightfully his. Upon meeting his mother again, without revealing his identity as he is still in disguise, he describes the sufferings he has endured as he has wandered as an ex-patriot.

Puesto que le queréis, oíd mis penas,

[. . .]

Os daré de mi vida alguna seña;

Mas tan oscura que el sensible punto  
De mi fatalidad, nunca se vea;  
Yo vi, en mala hora, amanecer un día  
Que en vano para siempre anoheciera  
[. . .]

Lo encuentra y gimo, porque en él mi padre  
Al fallo sucumbió de muerte fiera  
Por homicida mano ejecutada  
Entonces ¡ay! la misteriosa estrella  
Que el fatalismo sugirió a mi cuna  
Y un destino colmado de fiereza  
Me arrancan de los brazos de mi madre  
[. . .]

Quince lunas corrí, peregrinando  
El pan y el agua en la mayor miseria  
[. . .]

De baldón en baldón, de mengua en mengua,  
Así corrí gran tiempo abandonado  
Al más duro dolor y penitencia (250 – 251)

Though Selim's suffering is not borne of the same circumstances as Manzano's, there is a link that connects them: they have both been separated from their family and displaced by a master figure that he refers to in verse as "fortuna",

“destino” “fatalidad” and “mala estrella”. Throughout *Autobiografía* he shows great concern for the welfare of his family and goes from periods of time when he is close to them, even living with them, to times when he is alone and removed far from them. He is particularly concerned about his mother and his younger brothers, Fernando and Florencio. His most cruel and lasting punishment comes when he defends his mother against a beating she receives for verbally defending him. They are both beaten badly and taken and held in a jail. Manzano then suffers arguably his greatest punishment; that of seeing his mother beaten.

viendo yo a mi madre en este estado suspenso no podía yorar ni discutir ni huir temblaba inter sin pudor lo cuatro negro se apoderaron de ella la arrojaron en tierra p<sup>a</sup> azotarla pedia p<sup>r</sup> Dios p<sup>r</sup> ella todo lo resistí, pero al oír estallar el primer fuetazo, conbertido en leon en tigre o en la fiera mas animosa estube a pique de perder la vida a manos de el sitado Silvestre pero pasemos en silencio el resto de esta exena dolorosa (Manzano 16).

Different from the rest of the scenes of his suffering, Manzano cannot bear to relive this one and chooses silence instead. Like Selim’s, his family life too, is fractured. As a slave he is transferred from place to place on the whim of his masters and truly has no rights to associate with his family though he is permitted to from time to time. Selim’s separation is similar in that he has no control over it and is forcibly removed. He comments that “[M]e arrancan de los brazos de mi

madre” and that he is “abandonado”. Earlier in the play he also says he is “despatriado” and “extranjero” as he returns to the city of his birth. In fact, Selim’s entrance to the city is very similar to Manzano’s sonnet “A la ciudad de Matanzas después de una larga ausencia”. In both instances he returns home hoping for a reunion with his family. In the poem however, his return is disappointing, Matanzas has changed in his absence and he cannot find the same markers that remind him of happier times; the “manglar y uvero” (201) are gone, as is the happiness that once resided there too, though the beauty of Matanzas is still present.

Tamaña variedad júbilo ofrece

Pues quien te abandonó tan desmedrado,

Hoy con placer filial te ve, y se asombra. (202)

Though the image portrayed here is positive, it is only so for a moment as the poem turns quickly to reveal Manzano’s disrupted family life. Selim’s return is no different; he is also anxious to see the sights that will remind him of his peaceful life before the death of his father and destruction of his family. And temporarily so he finds them.

Ya te vuelvo a pisar morada augusta

Donde mi infancia fue . . . ya en ti renazco,

Y a tu sombra querrá benigno el cielo,

Que hasta aquí mi existencia ha custodiado,

Aplacar el rigor con que el destino

Colmó de azares mis primeros años.

Todo existe a mi vista cual estaba. (239)

This happiness is short-lived as his “re-birth” and re-acquaintance with his mother only leads to the total loss of his family. In the end however, though everything looks the same, Selim’s experience is equal to that of Manzano’s returning to Matanzas in that both signify the destruction of his family. The “placer filial” that alludes to a brotherly bond with the city in Manzano’s poem appears not because Manzano liked it there, (this is the location of el Molino, after all) but because his family was there. In his poem, “Un sueño”, dedicated to his brother Florencio, he sees in a dream various locations in and near Matanzas (“que de Quintanna el cerro” (209), “Descendiendo con tino; de Matanzas al seno” (210) “del Palenque soberbio, el suntuoso Molino” (211);). They remind him of his brother and not only the “amor fraterno”(211) they shared but also the sufferings they bore together.

Tú Florencio que sabes

Las penas que padezco

Cuan Justas y fundadas

Martirizan mi pecho.

Si tú que en otros días

Calmabas mis tormentos,

O juntas con las mías

Tus lágrimas corrieron. (208)



[. . .]

Huyamos pues, le dije,

De este recinto horrendo,

Más terrible a mi vista

Que la del horca mesmo:

Huyamos caro hermano,

Partamos por el viento;

Por siempre abandonemos

Nuestro enemigo suelo (212)

Manzano's wish is to reunite with his brother and escape from bondage, to have a stable family not fractured and interrupted by the rigors of slavery and the cruelty experienced at El Molino. Forever associated with Matanzas are these two images of family and plantation that are contradictory in nature. The family will never be able to be reconciled as the cruel force of the plantation is too much to overcome. As Manzano indicates in "A la ciudad", he has returned home, but it is different and will never be the same again. Selim's experience is equal; after his mother's suicide he refuses to take the throne and rejects the homeland to which he returned in jubilation. If there is no family, there is no home.

Dejadme lamentar, que al fin soy hombre,

Y a los sensibles seres pertenezco.

Hijos de Mauritania. . . a Dios. . . ya brilla

De vuestra libertad del lauro eterno.

Yo mi pena labré y vuestra ventura  
A un tiempo mismo. . . a esa madre os dejo  
Llenad vuestros deberes como amigos,  
Que ya no quiero un trono ensangrentado  
Con las preciosas vidas de mis deudos.(319 - 320)

The autobiographical character Selim Eutemi mirrors Manzano in many ways; from his sufferings and difficult life and as a lost son and brother, he is another avenue of travel for Manzano's discourse. He provides a unique set of circumstances through which he can freely decry slavery and its conditions, yet pass the censor and stand the test of time. Indeed, he has found another interdictory space within the hegemonic dominating discourse that he is able to exploit to further his autonomous voice. However, Selim is not the last, nor the most creative character through which Manzano chooses to editorialize and testify autobiographically. Unexpectedly so, through a feminist reading of *Zafira*, one finds another autobiographical source, (and thus another similarity to Avellaneda's title character Sab); that of the play's title character Zafira.

In her 1988 article "Sab c'est moi" Doris Sommer finds in Sab a self-portrait of Avellaneda herself. While she acknowledges the feminist readings of the text that "give her a gender-specific claim on her work" (111), she also recognizes that

Avellaneda has always figured in the canonical, overwhelmingly male mainstream of Hispanic literature. Neither Old World, nor New World,

neither a woman's writer, nor a man's, Gertrudis was both, or something different; she was Sab. (111)

Her Lacanian reading of the text concludes that it would be difficult to say that Avellaneda's identity with Sab is autobiographical; they are far too different to be considered as such. On the level of symbolic order, however she finds too many similarities to dismiss this notion altogether.

The stunning thing about this self-portrait is that it identifies author with an apparently helpless slave through their shared productive function, their literary labor conditioned in both by the need to subvert and reconstruct. The obscure slave represents the privileged novelist because both vent their passions by writing and because their literary slippages destabilize the rhetorical system that constrains them. (111)

Sommer's conclusion is that Sab is as complex a character as Avellaneda is an author. Both Avellaneda's writing and Sab's presence transgress the symbolic order and "destabilize" the already weakened patriarchal system that centers them. Sab is a feminized male subject, an "other" that will always remain a castrated subject marked as such by his race (he is described as "un mulato perfecto" (Servera 104), his social status (almost but not white), and by the symbolic autobiographical identification with his author. Very much in this same way, Manzano/Zafira can also be read as a feminized subject for many of the same reasons. As Arroyo analyzes the stereotypical creation of the body of the

mulatto in *Sab, O Mulato* (1881), and *Cecilia Valdés* she also finds a correlation between the feminized bodies of both Sab and Manzano.

[E]l mulato presenta características muy similares. Este personaje es producto de una mezcla racial y tiene características estereotipadas de la raza negra y la raza blanca; también es un sujeto lleno de contradicciones, dado a la melancolía y al silencio – igual que el personaje de Manzano – o extremadamente agresivo o demostrativo en sus afectos. Es estas novelas el mulato tiene dotes artísticas formadas por un espíritu romántico y un carácter excesivamente sentimental como en el caso del esclavo Sab. (74-75)

In addition to having a feminized and overly emotional character, Manzano seems to readily identify with female characters as most of his experience within the master/slave dialectic has been with female mistresses. He is for the most part, without a valid father figure for most of his life. Though he passes from master to master, his identification will always be most with his mother and with his mistresses within the symbolic order. As such, he also identifies himself as having feminized characteristics. He describes himself often as being undersized and weak (“yo era en extremo medroso” (11), “mis bracillos” (11), (“pequeñez de estatura y la debilidad de mi naturaleza” (12)), thus feminizing his body through difference and positing himself as having something less than a male body. Azougarh comments as well that in his poem “La esclava Ausente” “Manzano se desdobra, asume el ser de una esclava, con tan pasmosa naturalidad en el

acierto, que ha hecho dudar de la paternidad del poema a una distinguida crítica y profesora”(Azougarh 37). Though Azougarh fails to mention just who this “distinguida crítica y profesora” is, his point is clear; Manzano readily feminizes his voice when it serves his purposes. Though these numerous associations with feminine characters allow us to find in the Arabian princess Zafira another autobiographical identity for Manzano we cannot simply say that Zafira is a feminized version of Manzano. In the same sense that the character Sab is not a masculine autobiographical representation of Avellaneda, both character and author must be analyzed in their own respective spheres of representation. However, it is clearly evident in both cases that the character's situations certainly reflect the situations of their author's and the autobiographical implications are too obvious to overlook and too important to ignore.

First, as I have previously stipulated, part of the story in *Zafira* is the tale of a fractured family, of which Zafira is the head. She is the mother of Selim who is more concerned for the welfare of her son than she is in preserving her kingdom. She grieves for him when she thinks he is dead and longs to embrace him when she realizes he is her son before he reveals himself to her once again. Manzano writes into Zafira a little bit of what he saw his own mother go through as his own family was torn apart and separated by slavery and its punishments. However, her predicament is also akin to Manzano's as well as she is caught in a triangle of masters, his familial and political obligations.

Betrothed to Barbarroja by force, she sees no other option than to comply with his proposal in order to save her kingdom from destruction. She is enslaved by his desire for her body and for her power. Barbarroja controls her destiny as her body and her will are subjugated to him. In this same way Manzano's body was never his either as it was controlled by his mistress The Marchioness de Prado Ameno. She exercised her authority over him at every available opportunity and constantly reminded him that his body and his life belonged to her, and not to himself. "Te he de matar antes de que cumplas la edad" (82) he remembers her saying. With this warning and the constant threat of el Molino over his head, his slave mistress tries to own not only his body but his will as well. Likewise, Zafira and her kingdom will belong to Barbarroja. As she laments her situation, her words ring strikingly familiar in comparison to Manzano's own words in "Treinta años" and "La vision"

No: el cielo, la tierra, hasta el abismo  
Contra mi infausta suerte conjurados  
Por todas partes me persiguen juntos,  
Un porvenir funesto presagiando. (230)

Just as Manzano the slave has little control over his destiny, so does Zafira. Her will has been subjugated to Barbarroja's desire and as such has become as enslaved to him as Manzano is to The Marchioness de Prado Ameno.

At the same time Zafira is offered a way out of her situation by Barbarroja's brother Issac. He agrees to take her back to her father's kingdom in

Mustigia where she will be free from his brother's usurpations and can reign until her death. Here Issac proclaims:

¡Ah! cuántos males  
A un delincuente soportar es dado,  
De gozo me serán si al fin consigo  
Darte unos días que te usurpa ingrato  
Del destino final: vuélvate libre  
Yo a respirar en los paternos brazos.  
Sea el más digno autor de tus contentos  
Como lo fueron otros que de tu llanto  
Y muera luego que feliz te vea:  
Sobre Mustigia plácida reinando. (238)

Though his intentions for Zafira are good natured, Issac is still in control of granting her freedom if she decides to accept his offer. Again, Zafira's will is subject to another, though it will bring her release from her bondage to Barbarroja. This reflects the very nature of the relationship between Manzano and Domingo Del Monte. Though it is understood that Manzano gained his freedom through writing, Del Monte is always in control of granting that freedom and ultimately does so; Manzano is subject to him until that finally happens. Just like Manzano, Zafira is pulled between two diametrically opposed forces that determine her fortune. As an usurped queen, she is subject through Barbarroja and Issac to the symbolic Law of the Father which desires and appropriates her

as a subject and controls her destiny. As a slave, Manzano's body and will are under constant subjection to his mistress as are his hopes and desires to Del Monte by his writing (Arroyo 66). In service he tries to become or imitate his mistress; through his *Autobiografía* he imitates or becomes the subject Del Monte creates for him. In creating the character Zafira, he has done exactly that which Avellaneda has done with Sab. He has autobiographically re-gendered himself to appropriate the position of the other in the symbolic order in order to more effectively communicate his own precarious colonial situation.

As Miller rightly points out the production of *Zafira* marks an important milestone in Cuban "minority" literature. Though I have analyzed it here as another reiteration of Manzano's *Autobiografía* this is only one of the many different implications the re-discovery of this text presents us as it leaves much more to yet be investigated. The very act of it being written and published in the political climate it was – in the middle of the events that led to the Escalera Conspiracy and after Manzano's manumission – is an accomplishment in and of itself that deserves a separate study. For a text such as this, that as Miller asserts had obvious anti-colonial implications and could be read as an allegory of Cuban politics at the time (53), to be written by a former slave and still pass the censors was nothing short of miraculous and needs to be further investigated and explained. This is however why the identification of a plantation counter-discourse in Manzano's work is relevant. It explains how Manzano was able to accomplish such a feat. His text appears to mimic the dominant discursive



aesthetics and is accepted without much more than a superficial reading that does not take into account all the text really communicates when more closely analyzed. He is able to disguise his comments on the issues of race, class and politics in a safe medium that protects himself and his work from state scrutiny. Though I have proposed to answer some of the questions posed by the enigmatic nature of this work, many still abound, and many parallels between this work and other nineteenth century texts can readily be drawn. And though I have not endeavored to mention them here, the text also plays on several Shakespearean and tragic Greek themes that also need to be analyzed. Indeed *Zafira* is enigmatic, but it is also Manzano's most accomplished work of art that confirms his intellectual status and quiets the critics who would hastily misjudge and discount his texts through superficial readings and slanted critical approaches.

Through *Zafira*, *Versos* and *Autobiografía* Manzano communicates not only the dominant anti-slavery discourse through a romantic aesthetic but also creates a unique autonomous discourse that carries more significance and influence than does his *Autobiografía* by itself. In this sense, his contribution as a poet is also greater and should be appreciated more than his contribution as a subject. Indeed, he should be remembered more as a slave-Poet than as a poet-Slave. His works and discourse create a vision of Cuban subjectivity that describes and posits his voice as a subject in the middle of plantation society and the "ciclo fatal" described by Benítez-Rojo. He addresses the issues of slavery,

racism and colonialism head on and the experience of his harsh and often unforgiving life provides a perspective that stands out in subtle contrast to the controlling discourse of nineteenth century Cuba in ways that continue to be relevant and deserves careful scholarship and critical consideration.

## Chapter 3

### Inciting Revolution? Plácido's Poetry and the Escalera Conspiracy of 1844: A Counter-Creole Discourse

*Sus méritos son escasos, su grandeza  
es dudosa y su propio destino un  
misterio todavía* - Miguel Sanguily,

*El poeta no muere;  
Pues del tiempo y los hombres  
La Historia está en su lira  
Y la inmortalidad está en sus cantos*  
Diego Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés  
(Plácido)

#### Introduction: A Metaphorical Premonition

According to the fantastical chronicle re-narrated by Cuban historian Leopoldo Horrego Estuch<sup>20</sup>, near the end of the year 1836 the celebrated expatriate Cuban poet José María de Heredia y Campuzano received special permission from Cuban governor Don Miguel Tacón to return from his exile in México and visit his homeland one last time. Among all the places and people to see during his return, Heredia made it a special point to visit a small carpentry shop in Matanzas. His purpose there was to meet one of the workers who used the rough tortoise-shell looking *carey* wood to fashion “peinetas”, decorative combs that adorned the hair of the period's fashionable women. Heredia

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<sup>20</sup> While it is obvious, even in the very title and throughout his book *Plácido, el poeta infortunado* that Horrego Estuch maintains a fairly subjective approach to his version of Plácido's history, he does carefully chronicle the poet's life and his book remains one of the most complete and recognized histories on Plácido to date. For this and other critical purposes I have consulted Horrego Estuch's book as a primary source. To temper his subjectivity I have also heavily relied on the works of José F. Buscaglia Salgado, Jorge Castellanos, Daisy Cué Fernández, Vera Kusintsky, and Robert Paquette, all of which summarize to one extent or another, the life of Plácido as a preface to an analysis of his poetry.

presented himself to the shop's owner Dámaso García and asked to speak with the worker, who was also a poet, but one whose fame had not afforded him the same economic benefits that Heredia's had. This worker/poet instead published his verses in local newspapers and recited and improvised them from time to time as a supplement to his main income as an artisan. When the shop owner García announced to this worker that he was sought out by a person "muy bien portada y desconocida," (Horrego Estuch 83) and being so used to requests from locals to compose poems for weddings, funerals and other tributes, the worker casually strolled to the front of the shop. According to Horrego Estuch, supposing the stranger to be another one of these importuning his services, nonchalantly called out "¡Algún majadero que viene por versos!" (83).

As Horrego Estuch chronicles the story, the worker, surprised at seeing the well-dressed Heredia and in light of this previous offhand comment, cordially and apologetically inquired about the nature of his visit, to which Heredia replied "A tener el gusto de conocerlo antes de abandonar my patria. ¡Yo soy Heredia!" (83). Genuinely taken aback by the presence of the famous poet, the worker hesitated and excused himself briefly, apologizing again for being shirtless and covered in the dust of his trade. Then the two sat down as Horrego Estuch imagines it, "en banquillos polvorientos frente a frente" (83).

Horrego Estuch then asserts that the two poets "[s]e contaron sus desgracias [. . .]. Para Heredia, [. . .] la de vivir fuera de Cuba: para [el otro], afincarse a esta tierra de esclavitud y tiranía" (83). From there the account goes

on to say that moved to compassion at the extreme poverty of his counterpart, Heredia offered to pay for him to move to Mexico where he could concentrate on poetry. The worker refused the offer however, claiming that his responsibilities would keep him on the island and again according to Horrego Estuch, seeming to submit his will to fate replied with a smile “¡No puedo irme de aquí: soy muy cubano!” (83).

This anecdote describes of course, according to Cuban lore, the only known meeting between Heredia and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, better known and remembered by his pseudonym, Plácido. Though this would be the only time the two would ever supposedly meet, their poetic lives would forever become inexorably linked in Cuban and Latin American literature and history. While this meeting was very brief and seemingly did little to further either poet's career - in spite of Horrego Estuch's contrived characterization of its importance - for my purposes here its metaphorical implications are numerous. As José F. Buscaglia-Salgado notes, “[i]n the ‘sociopoetic’ continuum of early nineteenth century Cuba, [Heredia] occupied the obverse side of the coin to Plácido” (230) (contrary to what Horrego Estuch would lead us to believe). And though it is not my intent to fully compare and contrast the work of these two venerable Cuban poets, I will use the life and work of Heredia as a counter-point to Plácido's in order to highlight and emphasize his marginalization and illustrate what Buscaglia-Salgado has coined, as referred to above, “the ‘sociopoetic’ continuum of early nineteenth century Cuba”. In doing so I will look at this account of their

meeting as a metaphorical premonition and argue that though Plácido's poetry is often associated with the predominant anti-slavery and proto-Cuban independence discourse represented by Heredia, due to his racial, social and economic circumstances and to some extent his own choice, Plácido does not have access to this developing discourse. Instead, his poetry actually represents a separate, more subtle, interdictory counter-Creole discourse that only mimics and approximates the more radical and outspoken Creole discourse. In particular I will look at Plácido's poem "Jicoténcal" in comparison with the 1826 novel *Jicoténcal* (which has been attributed to Heredia)<sup>21</sup>, and show how in contrast, Plácido's poem can be read as a more subtle cry for rebellion against Spanish colonial authority than the more overt one found in the allegorical novel and how this poem also communicates Plácido's counter-Creole discourse. I will also examine "La ambarina" and his other often misunderstood and under-evaluated so-called "laudatory" and "political poems" and illustrate how, even though they appear to be praising Spain and its monarchs, they are actually harsh criticism against Spain's absolutist governmental history and the Spanish colonial authority that was Plácido's reality. My analysis will show that in Plácido's poetry there exists a sustained and concentrated plantation counter-discourse that functions along the lines of the white Creole nationalist discourse but is counter

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<sup>21</sup> The authorship of the novel *Jicoténcal* (1826) is unknown, and has been a heavily debated topic, however the most prominent and recent studies attribute the work to either Felix Varela or Heredia. I will discuss this in greater detail further in the chapter, though for the purposes of my analysis of Plácido's poem, identifying the exact author is irrelevant as the work is clearly a product of the literary circle to which both Varela and Heredia belonged and falls under the same hegemony to which their other works pertain.

to it at the same time; a Creole-counter discourse rooted in the same Creole hegemonic tradition, but voiced by a mulatto artisan poet that does not have access to dominant discourses and instead forges his own shaped by his personal experience and understanding of the times in which he lived. By identifying this unique discourse, which could not be expressed in the same way by the other writers purporting their own white Creole nationalist discourse, it will be evident that greater critical focus needs to be given to Plácido and that his poetry is much more complex than it looks. As such it must be read much more carefully than it has been by both nineteenth century and contemporary criticism.

Aside from the fact that both Plácido and Heredia were Romantic poets who died at the age of thirty-five, their single greatest commonality was their love for their native Cuba, and, as evidenced in their writing, a yearning for its freedom from Spanish colonial authority, though it could hardly be said that they really even shared the same project in this aspect. However, as illustrated by their encounter in Matanzas, these two talented poets were, economically and socially, nearly polar opposites. Heredia was the son of a rich white diplomat, travelled frequently, and truthfully only lived in Cuba for little more than six years of his life.<sup>22</sup> In death he would be remembered as one of the great champions of the Cuban struggle for independence and, according to José Martí “el primer poeta de América” (Author Unknown, *Estudios de México* 21). On the other hand, Plácido was of mixed race, struggled mightily in all matters financial, and

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<sup>22</sup> In his recent biography of Heredia, Leonardo Padura Fuentes explains why Heredia chose Cuba as his country of origin instead of Mexico, and how this ultimately helped shape his writing and philosophy.

although he travelled extensively throughout Cuba, he never was able (or willing, it appears) to ever leave the island.

In great contrast to Heredia's life of relative privilege, Plácido's life is certainly one of constant struggle and marginalization. As such, he is able to relate through his poetry a Cuban experience different from that of Heredia, or of than any other member of the Del Monte circle for that matter, including Juan Francisco Manzano. As a free person of color in early nineteenth century Cuban society, he is an interstitial and interdictory subject by his very nature. As a mulatto artisan is able to interact with all facets of society, while not considered a member of any one strata or group. As a brief study of his ambivalent life bears out, more than anything Plácido was a social enigma; debate still continues regarding the social and racial contradictions presented by his unique personality.

### **“El Doble Estigma” and Poetic Formation in a Plantation Society**

Born the mulatto son of a white Spanish dancer and a “pardo cuarteron” barber in early nineteenth century Havana (Horrego Estuch 16), it seems that societal circumstance and nature would mark Plácido's life with difficulty and difference from his very conception. His mother, young and not ready to raise a child, abandoned him at eighteen days at the local orphanage. As Horrego Estuch points out, this could have been very beneficial to Plácido because as he was fair skinned, he could have hid his racial identity and potentially have saved himself from some of the difficulties that a Cuban society based on plantation



economics and heavily steeped in classism and racism would heap upon him later on in life. His father however, at the insistence of his mother and sister, claims his son from the “Casa-Cuna” (Horrego Estuch 38) and takes him to live with the paternal family some months later. This act immediately identifies his race and marks him permanently in two ways. First, remarks Horrego Estuch. “el padre al llevarlo a su abrigo, por un acto de responsable obligación, le impuso su mulatez” (39); this act, as Daisy Cué Fernández points out, also marks him as an illegitimate child and destines him to a life of meager income, constant labor, and social struggle

[A] lo largo de sus treinta años de existencia, debió arrastrar como una larga cadena el doble estigma de hijo ilegítimo y mestizo, lo cual bastaba y sobraba en lo sociedad colonial cubana de la primera mitad del siglo XIX para vivir relegado a una posición de definida inferioridad social. (16)

As the story of his life bears out, this “doble estigma” becomes an important part of Plácido’s identity both as a citizen and a poet and ultimately shapes his poetry and limits his access to the predominant Creole discourse of the period.

In his discussion of Plácido’s origins, Buscaglia-Salgado points out that even his very name contributed to his personal ambiguity; he was never called by a name that would identify him as a child of two legitimately married parents. Instead, he would always be officially identified as either “Gabriel de la Concepción or Gabriel Matoso, names that referred to one of his parents but never both at the same time as is customary in the Spanish tradition” (Buscaglia-

Salgado 221). Ultimately, he is given the last name Valdés, after the Catholic Bishop Gerónimo Valdés, who founded the orphanage from which he was retrieved by his father. Just as that act, as Horrego Estuch indicates, “le impuso su mulatez”, adopting the surname name Valdés forever identified Plácido as illegitimate and brought upon him all the consequences that come with being identified as being born out of wedlock. The very conservative Cuban society of the time stigmatized illegitimacy almost as equally as it did miscegenation. Any individual identified as pertaining to either social category would have faced more than their fair share of mistreatment. Plácido’s lot as a poet, however, would be to bear the weight of both at the same time.

Thus he was born to suffer all his life the double stigma of being a mulatto and a bastard in a slave-owning society that was in every sense extremely conservative and where people like him were expected to assume their proper place, learning a trade but not necessarily learning to write, and certainly not good enough to call themselves poets. (Buscaglia-Salgado 221)

Though this combination of stigmas resulting from his unique racial mixture and social standing created for him a lifetime of difficulties, it would ultimately be the key to the enduring quality of Plácido’s poetry. Only through his ambiguity is he allowed to narrate his experience in nineteenth century Cuban society in unique ways that could not otherwise be done. However, this also creates a problematic vision of the poet as more historical and critical attention has been paid to the

conditions and events of his life than to the quality of his poetry. Roberto Méndez Martínez remarks that Plácido's unique history makes him "un marginal perfecto" (1), who was indeed denied access to the circles of literary and intellectual power in early nineteenth century Cuba due to the social conditions surrounding him. This fact has been celebrated so much that his poetry has almost been displaced as the focal point of all Placidian studies in Cuban letters.

Harto ha escrito una bibliografía, más preocupada por su azarosa existencia que por las entrañas de su escritura, su nacimiento como hijo bastardo y expósito, su condición de mestizo, la obligación de vivir de la artesanía, no sólo del carey sino de la palabra misma, como único modo de subsistencia y, para colmo, esa condición social fronteriza que le hace un inferior en los círculos ilustrados de la sociedad blanca y un ser ambiguo en aquellos miméticos salones de los pardos y morenos libres que conformaban una pequeña burguesía. (1)

Unable to associate with, or to some degree to even be recognized by the elite intellectuals of early nineteenth century Cuba, Plácido's poetry bears all the marks of the many different facets of society with which he is able to associate and is highly reflective of his experiences and struggles. Though we find that these traits in his poetry are indeed what bear relevance today, unfortunately they would not be understood during his own lifetime, neither by the Cuban colonial authority who martyred him nor by the Cuban lettered society and his

critics, who favored the more stylized romantic poetry of Heredia, the symbol of early nineteenth century white Creole consensus in Cuba.

In addition to the obvious racial and economic conditions that separated these two initiators of Cuban Romanticism, educational opportunities also play a factor in the difference between Heredia and Plácido and would serve to further limit Plácido's ability to approximate Heredia's predominant status as a poet. Heredia was well-educated and polished, his poetry refined and advanced. Plácido however, never even attended school until the age of ten and then only for a few years. As Horrego Estuch so candidly remarks, this is perhaps the single greatest factor that marks the difference between Plácido's and Heredia's poetry.

A la edad que Plácido comenzaba a probar el alimento de la enseñanza, Heredia traducía a Horacio y preparaba la publicación de varias poesías con el título *Ensayos Poéticos*. Esa es la diferencia entre la posesión y la ausencia de instrucción adecuada. (Horrego Estuch 19)

Despite Horrego Estuch's insistence on excusing Plácido's perceived weaknesses Plácido's lack of an extensive formal education is evident in the early stages of his poetry. It is, however, something that he is over time able to overcome and hide through aptitude and talent, though it may have also been the primary reason he received such harsh criticism among his contemporaries and other nineteenth century critics. Speaking of this early poetic production Horrego Estuch further speculates that

De haber tenido una educación disciplinada en general, específicamente de la métrica, a esta edad su producción hubiera sido más perfecta...

Ahora bien la fluidez, la suavidad de los versos, su encadenamiento espontáneo y la robustez armoniosa dejan como sepultada la deficiencia académica que solo a la lupa exigente aparece. (26)

While Horrego Estuch's conjecture here can certainly be debated, it is abundantly clear that Plácido lacked the formal training and style of Heredia. Unlike Heredia, Plácido received his education in bits and chunks, from whatever sources he had available and formed his poetry and discourse based on his experience and need to creatively produce poetry in order to support himself. For Plácido, poetry always represented a means to an end, rather than an exercise in artistic production (Mendéz Martínez 2).

In her book *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2004) Sibylle Fischer also comments on Plácido's formation as a poet, comparing him to a Jazz musician who learns to improvise music based on memorized scales and motifs but sees music as an inherently individualized creative process. In her argument she compares Plácido's poetry and education to the collage-style "book" kept by José Antonio Aponte, which was one of the main pieces of evidence submitted against the rebel conspirator Aponte prior to his execution in 1812<sup>23</sup>. Though it is debatable whether her argument here can be considered one of the most comprehensive and

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<sup>23</sup> For more detailed analysis of Aponte and the "Aponte Rebellion" See Chapter 1 and Childs *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery* (2006).

authoritative analyses of Plácido's formation as a poet, the point she makes concerning his education and his poetry is quite clear: it is "transgressive" (95) and affronting to the cultured elites of Cuba in the early nineteenth century.

According to Fischer, in the same way that Aponte pieced together images, phrases, articles and literature to establish a convincing document indicting Spanish colonial authority, likewise Plácido gains an education and transforms himself into an accomplished poet in both written and oral forms, inscribing himself on the public consciousness, whether authorized to do so by the elite educated society or not.

Plácido appropriates things and materials that come his way, and like Aponte, his knowledge of the European repertoire comes from fairly random sources. Instead of assimilating the classical canon under the Law – be it the aesthetic law, the prescriptive guidance of educated Creoles, or years of schooling – Plácido appeared to submit to no rule at all. Or at least to no rule that was recognizable to the elites. He had developed his poetic skills outside the litero-centric circles of the elites, on the streets, in poetry competitions and games. [. . .] Plácido's riffing on classical and mythical names probably needs to be understood in similar terms: as an improvisational technique and a mnemotechnic aid. Creole intellectuals who perceived Plácido's poetry as transgressive and outside aesthetic law simply failed to see that his practice followed rules that originated in

choteo,<sup>24</sup> oral recitation, and improvisation rather than in the manuals that circulated at the time. [. . .] Plácido seizes themes and motifs from high culture and integrates them into a practice that follows its own rules. (95)

Gaining education and experience outside the norms of accepted practice and conventions of the elite high culture of early nineteenth century Cuba, within his lifetime Plácido garnered a reputation and became “the most famous person of color in Cuba” (Paquette 259) largely on the strength of his talent. However this fame lead to little economic benefit during the his own lifetime and though his poetry has actually been published more than that of Heredia (Fischer 77), Plácido would never rise to Heredia’s level of critical reverence and esteem and was largely rejected by the white reformist establishment in Cuba and the Caribbean.

Always a problematic figure in Cuba, history has remembered Plácido more for his ambiguity, his ambulant lifestyle, and the tragedy of his death while his work has been relegated “to relative obscurity [. . .] in Cuban letters” (Buscaglia-Salgado 232). In many regards he is more famous for being a martyred mulatto poet than for being a great poet, and, as this has been

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<sup>24</sup> Fischer refers here to and quotes from Jorge Mañach’s original 1928 essay “Indagación del choteo” (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1940 rpt. Miami: Mnemosyne. 1969) on the common Cuban practice of oral response defined as “A human and social attitude whose instinctive goal is to affirm one’s own identity against that of some other that declares itself to be superior or equally powerful. Every taunt in fact presupposes an authority, or at least a competition.” (As quoted and translated by Fischer, 95). This oral aspect of Plácido’s work is possibly the least understood and under-analyzed element of his poetry and life, and in Cuba for that matter. While Mañach’s essay certainly covers “el choteo” in great detail, Fischer’s use of his article fails to mention the fact that this type of extemporaneous poetry or “repentismo” was already a well-established form of poetic expression in the early nineteenth century.

perpetuated by many of his chroniclers and more recent critics, has elevated his level of fame and notoriety. To this extent Buscaglia-Salgado remarks that

Cuban critics have been more patient with Plácido, if only perhaps out of their desire to neutralize his inconsistencies and to promote him, despite his otherwise problematic image, to the level of a nonwhite hero of the nation. He has also served as a very welcome token, a mulatto intellectual in a society where, from Manzano to Guillén, few nonwhites have ever been granted the distinction of being considered “thinkers.” (225)

Though his poetry itself has seldom been analyzed in detail, in an effort to extol his position in Cuban letters and perpetuate this ideal of “the nonwhite hero,” most historians and critics have somewhat protected and apologized for Plácido. As such, he is largely remembered favorably as an intellectual and poet, a sentiment that still pervades most critical studies surrounding his life and work, though more recent trends in criticism and historiography stemming from post-colonial studies have tended to be more objective as I will later illustrate. This does not mean however that he was without his detractors. In fact, most of the apologetic texts on Plácido written in the last one hundred and twenty five years, including Horrego Estuch’s biography, have stemmed as a reaction to the harsh late nineteenth century criticism launched against the mulatto poet that range from calling his poetry “rudimentaria”, “infantil” and “primitiva” (Sanguily “Un



improvisador cubano 103) to outright attacks on his character (Buscaglia-Salgado 222; Castellanos 12; Cué Fernández 25; Kutzinski 84; Paquette 5)<sup>25</sup>.

As illustrated by the more recent critical evaluations of Plácido's life and work Buscaglia-Salgado, Castellanos, Cué Fernández, Kutzinski and Paquette agree that the late nineteenth century was overly harsh towards Plácido from a critical standpoint. Though there were many writers that took a stand against him, the most vehement of these late nineteenth century critics are the Cuban writers Manuel Sanguily, and Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, and the Puerto Rican educator Eugenio María de Hostos. Each of these writers considered Plácido to be an inferior intellectual and poet as well as a traitor and conspirator against Cuba and their version of Creole society (Buscaglia-Salgado 223). Each argued against the idea of Plácido being vaunted as a symbol of Cuban identity and while his poetry itself is seldom cited directly in their arguments, they heavily discounted and regarded it as simplistic, imitative, and unoriginal (Sanguily, "Un improvisador cubano" 94). Particularly vile in his criticism is Sanguily who had more than just critical reasons to vilify Plácido. As a student of Plácido's contemporary José de la Luz y Caballero - who reputedly was named as a conspirator in the Escalera Conspiracy by Plácido - Sanguily could never forgive

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<sup>25</sup> To date, the most concise and comprehensive analysis on the criticism leveled against Plácido in the late nineteenth century is found in Daisy Cué Fernández's book *Plácido el poeta conspirador* in which she dedicates an entire section to reviewing all the major arguments both in favor of and against Plácido and his work. While she does not repeat and elaborate on every argument ever made for or against the poet, she does carefully attempt to narrate the critical landscape present both during and after Plácido's lifetime. Her writings combined with those of Buscaglia-Salgado, Castellanos, Kutzinsky and Paquette further highlight not only the trends in criticism of Plácido but also individual arguments both negative and positive and illustrate what, as previously noted, Buscaglia-Salgado calls "the socio-poetic continuum of early nineteenth century Cuba" (230).

the mulatto poet for being responsible for his mentor's arrest nor his apparent lack of "anti-Spanish nationalism" (Paquette 5). In an article written as response to an essay in which Menéndez y Pelayo acknowledged that Plácido's "romances" or sonnets, shared many of the same characteristics of Góngora's poems (Castellanos 12) Sanguily transgressed the boundaries of critical distance and entered the waters of character and racial assassination when he declared among other things that

[Plácido] no fue poeta de los cubanos, un poeta cubano, no fue poeta de los esclavos, no fue poeta de los negros. Era un mestizo por la sangre y fue mestizo también por el sentimiento en cuanto mezcló en su alma en el despegue respecto del blanco y el desprecio hacia el negro y en el entre tanto, procuró explotar a unos y a otros y vivió comúnmente explotándolos. (Sanguily "Otra vez Plácido" 232)

Following this same line of reasoning and racial bias, Hostos condemned Plácido's physical appearance and racial make-up "in almost pathological terms" (Buscaglia-Salgado 222) and dismissed Plácido's poetry just as smugly as Sanguily proclaiming that

Adulando lo que instintivamente maldecía, maldiciendo lo que acababa de adular con versos aduladores, ere resumen viviente del detestable momento de transición en que vivía, de la enferma sociedad que lo abortaba. (Hostos 27)

Fortunately, this wave of negative, reactionary and racist criticism reached its apogee before the turn of the twentieth century and the bulk of Placidian studies since then, for better or for worse, have chosen to regard him in a more positive light. Though the arguments of individuals the likes of Sanguily and Hostos clearly served to denigrate Plácido, their opinions were mostly a reflection of the social and racial politics established in the previous generation. As such, Plácido's struggle to be recognized as an intellectual was never more ardent before any other group of individuals than it was before his own peers, especially those of Del Monte circle, whose anti-slavery and proto-abolitionist writings and ideas dictated the dominant white Creole discourse of the time, as the following sections will illustrate.

### **Confronting Plácido: Cuban Creole Nationalism and Plácido's Counter-Creole Discourse**

As established in the previous chapters, Roberto Gonzalez Echevarría points out in *Myth and Archive* that the novel evolved through a mimetic discursive process in which the texts were written to "mirror" an authoritative discourse, often times in an effort to gain legitimacy for a cause that is other than literary. This holds true for the white Creole discourse functioning in Cuba in the first half of the nineteenth century. Spurred on largely in part by Del Monte and his "tertulia" (Luís 83; Labrador-Rodriguez 14) meetings, it was a Romantic anti-slavery and proto-abolitionist discourse designed to reform Cuban slavery and society altogether (Paquette 100 - 103). As Buscaglia-Salgado notes, "[t]he feud between the Creoles and the mulattoes had been organized around the

dichotomies of nation/plantation, independence/freedom” (230). The goal of these Creole intellectuals was to promote their own rights, limit the rights of other racial and social categories, and establish an inherent Cuban nation that was neither controlled by Spain, nor mixed with African blood. Resuming José Antonio Saco’s arguments defending the rights of Cuban plantation owners before the Spanish Cortes in 1837 Buscaglia-Salgado writes

Not surprisingly, [Saco] was appealing to the Spaniards on behalf of those he called Cubans and dismissing the rights of slaves and morenos [. . .]

Just as the good old Franciscan friars of Concepción de la Vega had done, Saco was arguing that like the ants attracted to the *solimán*, ‘those men’ were moved by instinct and not by sense. [. . .] Here lie the origins of the Creole project of Cuban independence, origins that are irrevocably tied to the defense of Creole rights against those of blacks and mulattoes [. . .]. (231)

Motivated by the notion that there existed in Cuba an inherent and natural social hierarchy in which whites occupied the upper strata due to their superior ability to reason above that of the blacks and mulattoes, the white reformist intellectuals of the Del Monte circle sought a Cuban independence in which their rights were exalted above all others. Going even further than Buscaglia-Salgado in his indictment against this brand of racism present in nineteenth century Cuba, Paquette describes that “[w]hite Cuban reactionaries used racism to reinforce the seigneurial notion that some were inferior to others; white Cuban liberals used

racism to show that some individuals were not persons at all” (114) and that “some of the worst offenders [of this notion] were members of Domingo Del Monte’s circle” (115). Paquette also goes on to illustrate that Del Monte himself, though he advocated abolition, “suggests how race could be used to modify his liberalism in needed political ways” (115). In other words, Del Monte and his followers established an ideal image of how they wanted Cuban society to be organized that did not allow for the inclusion of blacks and mulattoes or at least not on the same social strata as them. The perfect symbol to represent this ideal was of course Heredia, who “has always been regarded as a more clear example of *cubanía* – or that which is considered truly Cuban by Creole nationalist standards” (Buscaglia-Salgado 230), and whose embodiment would serve to further marginalize Plácido and create further distance between him and these white Creole standards.

Primarily because of his racial identity, Plácido was shunned by the Del Monte group and held at “a safe distance from a project that was all but inclusive” (231). According to their brand of reasoning, Plácido represented all that was wrong in Cuban society. Buscaglia-Salgado reasons that “just as for Hostos Placidian aesthetics were nothing but inconsistency and subterfuge, for the Creole patriarchs the mulatto world that Plácido personified was [. . .] essentially antinational” (231). In essence he did not fit within their vision of “*cubanía*” and though his poetry does echo to some extent the reformist sentiments of the Del Monte group (Cué Fernández 83), Plácido could not nor did not participate in the

Del Monte *tertulia* meetings nor correspond actively with the majority of the reformist intellectuals<sup>26</sup> nor were his texts circulated among its membership as were Manzano's to be guided, influenced, and shaped to conform to the discourse their texts were creating. This contempt would even extend well beyond the poet's death as Del Monte and his followers later blamed Plácido for falsely incriminating them in the Escalera Conspiracy. As Paquette records:

Domingo Del Monte and his fellow white liberals blamed Plácido for their subsequent troubles with the authorities. [. . .] Francisco Jimeno believed that Plácido incriminated Del Monte and members of his circle because that circle "where the flower and cream of our writers gathered," held Plácido in contempt for his deficiencies of character and unjustifiably proclaimed Juan Francisco Manzano's poetry superior to his. (260)

Because he did not fit within the parameters of the ideal image of the "flower and cream" writers representative of the Del Monte circle as characterized by Jimeno, and because Del Monte preferred the more testimonial poetry and autobiography of Juan Francisco Manzano (Paquette 260) - which he was more easily able to manipulate for his own purposes<sup>27</sup> - Plácido was flatly rejected by Del Monte himself and was denied access to his group. Equally so, idealistically,

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<sup>26</sup> The exception here is that he is friends with Ignacio Valdés Machuca ("Desval") who, as noted in Chapter 2, contributed money towards the purchase of both Manzano's manumission and the publication of *Zafira*. Valdés Machuca was an active participant in many of Del Monte's "tertulia" meetings and did also help Plácido in his formation as a poet.

<sup>27</sup> As illustrated in Chapter 2 (pg. 13) Del Monte had great control over what Manzano wrote and ultimately published. The questionable circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the second half of the *Autobiografía* manuscript illustrate clearly that Del Monte had a clear vision of the direction of this discourse; one that did not include Plácido in life or death. (See Paquette 110 – 111; 260-261)

thematically and aesthetically his texts did not conform to the white Creole discourse and hegemony created by their writings.

In addition to being rejected by them for his race and ambiguous personality, the Del Monte group also rejected Plácido for the aesthetics of his poetry. Often associated with a small group of poets who were also more commonly known by their pseudonyms – “Desval” (Ignacio Valdés Machuca), “Dorilo” (Manuel González del Valle) and “Delio” (Francisco Iturrondo) – Plácido’s poetry exhibited a style clearly contrary to that of the poetry stemming from the Del Monte group. “Desval”, “Dorilo” and “Delio” guided Plácido during his early years as a poet and practiced an aesthetics that adhered more closely to neo-classical forms and ideas which Del Monte also rejected. As Méndez Martínez notes in his recent analysis of Plácido:

Ellos resultaban para Domingo Del Monte la negación de su concepto intelectual: eran autores de “versitos”, no esa mezcla de estadistas, filósofos, pedagogos, y escritores morales que él reclamaba para su Cuba “patricia”. Por otra parte, tampoco era Plácido un “objeto de caridad” como Juan Francisco Manzano. No servía para la propaganda abolicionista porque era un hombre libre. Ni parecía prestarse a encargos con fines políticos, fueran testimoniales, como la *Autobiografía* de Manzano o de ficción, como la novela *Francisco* de Anselmo Suárez y Romero. (2)

Due to a combination of factors including his racial make-up, the style of his poetry, and his apparent lack of propagandistic value, Del Monte readily

dismissed Plácido; it also appears that this was a mutual sentiment as we find that Plácido, in turn, also rejected Del Monte.

While Del Monte denied having ever really associated with Plácido except for once when Plácido asked to borrow money (Paquette 263), other sources indicate the two had a more extensive relationship (Cué Fernández 82) and that Plácido testified in the Escalera Process that Del Monte even requested that he write a poem praising England and its anti-slavery stance, which he refused to do (Castellanos 126). Agreeing to such a request would have been indeed rare for the spontaneous-minded poet and serves to illustrate just how strained the relationship was between the leader of the white intellectual society and the artisan poet.

While it is obvious that Del Monte and Plácido definitely knew each other it is also obvious that, for whatever reasons, they did not get along and subsequently, Plácido was forced to forge a space of his own within Cuban letters – such a place represented the greatest threat to Del Monte's hegemonic ideal, Plácido's own discourse, a discourse derived from the same plantation society and as such, centered around the image of the plantation and the unique socio-economic conditions it created. As I will describe hereafter, Plácido's discourse existed and functioned independently of the white Creole nationalist discourse yet also ran concurrently and parallel to it, between the lines of white hegemony; mimicking it and countering it at the same time – a plantation



counter-discourse; just as previously identified in the cases of Avellaneda and Manzano, but more specifically for Plácido – a counter-Creole discourse.

In the same way – and for many of the same reasons as I have explained in earlier chapters – that Manzano and Avellaneda’s fictional Sab represent what Bhabha calls an “almost discourse” (Bhabha 89), so does Plácido and his poetry. Like Plácido, Avellaneda’s character Sab and Manzano are ambivalent subjects who appear to be a part of both slave (or in Plácido’s case, black) and white societies. And just as in the case of Plácido’s own ambiguity, in their excess, Sab and Manzano represent an “*almost*” discourse. In this same aspect, combined with the story of his life, Plácido’s poetry represents a slippage, or interdiction in the Creole anti-slavery and proto-abolitionist discourse that I have most readily identified with the writing of Heredia and the Del Monte circle. While they appear to talk about the same subjects and Plácido appears to sympathize with the same cause as Heredia and Del Monte, it is evident that he experiences Cuban colonialism and plantation culture through a markedly different perspective causing him to be rejected by this Creole nationalist discourse. This does not however cause Plácido to be silenced nor to ignore the themes and issues he wants to discuss, both as a Cuban citizen seeking an end to Spanish colonialism and as a socially conscientious artist. On the contrary, this position arguably gives him even more motivation and material to work with, and makes him a more cautious and wary writer as he has to disguise these same themes behind a wall of subterfuge and subtleness, where even the image of the plantation,

which is front and center in the writings of Avellaneda and Manzano, is more carefully relegated to the background. In doing so, Plácido creates a separate discourse that, though mirroring and mimicking the Creole nationalist discourse, actually falls between the lines of its hegemonic expectations, appearing to be in accordance with it yet counter to it at the same time. As ambiguous as is his racial identity, so is his poetry as it represents and communicates the facets of society that the Del Monte vision would attempt to erase. As his poetry narrates his own mulatto experience, it not only acknowledges his status as a mulatto but justifies and legitimizes its very existence. For Plácido however, this proved to be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it gave him and his poetry a sense of autonomy and creative license that still ring true today. On the other hand however, without the political and financial power and influence of the Del Monte group, it would become a thing that would ultimately serve to betray the young artisan and create the resulting “visceral response” (Buscaglia-Salgado 223) to his life and poetry that would still resound a generation later in the writings of Sanguily, Menéndez y Pelayo and Hostos. As he questions exactly what about Plácido would create such a response, Buscaglia-Salgado concludes that

I am inclined to think that it was not so much what Hostos termed Plácido’s “irresolute color”, but rather the fact that to him, as to most of the Creoles of the day, people like Plácido were the embodiment of a competing social agent whose growing access to the public sphere they

resented and whose claims to it they did not acknowledge unless it coincided with or buttressed their own political aspirations. (223)

Because he was more politically aligned with Del Monte and the other members of his literary circle, Heredia's poetry and his image alike naturally presented a more representative symbol of their brand of hegemony. On the other hand, Plácido's poetry, image and plantation counter-discourse presented a perceived danger to their ideals and politics, and sadly ironic, proved to be dangerous to Plácido also as ultimately it would prove to be the root of his undoing.

### ***Silencing the Poet: Plácido and La Escalera***

Due to their radical reformist, sometimes rebellious nature, most of the texts produced by the Del Monte group were never published in Cuba as they certainly would have never passed the strict censors. Plácido did however have to worry about the censors. His poetry was published almost exclusively in Cuba and anything controversial or radical would have been scrutinized heavily and could have led to his imprisonment. And as we see, this is indeed ultimately the truth as his association with the Escalera Conspiracy did result in his imprisonment and death on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1844; this fact, while over-celebrated and hyperbolized both in Cuban cultural history and modern literary criticism, cannot be overlooked. Indeed, to thoroughly analyze the extent of Plácido's influence in Cuba through his poetry, and his relationship to the Del Monte circle, whose power and influence also reached its apogee and was undone during this inquisitorial process, the events surrounding "La Escalera" and the involvement

of both Plácido and the Del Monte group must be taken into account. And while it is not my intent to re-tell this well documented history, analyzing Plácido's poetry in light of these events serves to solidify his marginalization both as a colonial subject and as a poet, and aids in illustrating the presence of his Creole-counter discourse.

The extent of Plácido's involvement in the events that led up to tribunals of 1844 now known as "La Escalera" has been widely studied and highly debated. The most prominent and thorough investigation of the whole conspiracy and the social, economic and political climate that fostered it, is Robert Paquette's book *Sugar is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (1988). Although over twenty years have passed since its first publication, it still remains the most comprehensive and serious study on the issue. It establishes the fact that a conspiracy did exist, though it was much less organized and more diffuse than the Spanish colonial government claimed at the time. More recently, Daisy Cué Fernández has published *Plácido, el poeta conspirador* (2007) – an extensive study of Plácido's life including a thorough analysis of his poetry. Her study is an effort to explain Plácido's status as a Cuban national hero and ascertain the extent of his involvement, through both his poetry and overt participation, in the conspiracy. Jorge Castellanos also very concisely addresses some of these same questions in his book *Plácido, poeta social y político* (1984). All have thoroughly examined

the issues and have come to very similar conclusions on the matter, though varying in degrees of nuance.

In *Sugar is Made with Blood* Paquette carefully examines colonial archives, transcripts of court proceedings, original correspondences between accused conspirators, and other primary and secondary sources to thoroughly examine the historical, socio-economic and political conditions that created the events surrounding the Escalera Conspiracy. Throughout the book he analyzes the life lived by Plácido and searches for any tangible proof of his direct involvement. He concludes that it is doubtful that Plácido was a leader of the vast rebellion envisioned by his Spanish captors, and states that, although the full extent of his complicity in the conspiracy may never be proven, his involvement was highly probable as he definitely knew details of the Conspiracy and was well acquainted with its alleged principals.

Plácido may not have led the Conspiracy of La Escalera or any other project, but between the extremes are numerous other possibilities, No definitive answer can be reached from the existing evidence about precisely what relation Plácido had to the Conspiracy of La Escalera. Although one can question the credibility of the government's witnesses, certain circumstantial evidence bolsters the possibility of his involvement: the expression of nationalist and separatist sentiment in his poetry; his curious movements in the interior of western Cuba in 1843; his arrest in Villa Clara that year on suspicion of subversion, [. . .]. (257)

As Paquette discovers, while Plácido may not have been a leader of the conspiracy it is very evident that he was neither completely innocent nor ignorant of the failed rebellion. And whether or not Plácido ever was guilty of conspiring to lead a slave revolt as he was accused by the Spanish colonial authority – he vehemently denied the charges up to the very moment of his execution and the case against him was highly suspect and circumstantial, relying on a disputed confession drawn out “under extreme physical and psychological duress” (260) – it is obvious that the Cuban colonial authorities considered him a threat because he was a poet. As Horrego Estuch asserts “a Plácido se le temía por sus versos y su popularidad” (209). In his comparison of Plácido and Manzano, Paquette points out that Plácido’s execution, much like Manzano’s imprisonment, was as much due to his status as a poet than it was as a founder of conspiracy and rebellion: “Juan Francisco Manzano went to jail initially because his color and surname matched those of one accused conspirator and because he, like Plácido, was a poet” (234). As such he represented an organizing and propagandistic threat against a Spanish Colonial power that fervently sought to quell any activity that could lead to the horrific events of revolution they had recently witnessed first in the United States, in Haiti and in the mainland former Spanish colonies. They did not believe they could afford for ideas of rebellion and sedition to circulate among the Cuban citizenry, not even in verse, and made

sure that Plácido and Manzano alike paid a steep price for belonging to such a threatening profession<sup>28</sup>.

In his analysis Jorge Castellanos points out that the two prevalent theories surrounding Plácido's involvement represent contradictory extremes – either he was totally innocent or he was totally complicit – innocent victim or conspiring martyr. Castellanos investigates both arguments and concludes that the truth lies somewhere in between these two poles and the result is that the poet was both victim and martyr. Citing evidence that while Plácido definitely had relations with various others accused of being conspirators, including Del Monte, Antonio Bernoqui, Miguel Manzano, and especially Luis Giguat<sup>29</sup> – the agent in Matanzas for the British consul in Havana David Turnbull – Castellanos argues that his involvement, though possible, was not probable and that there is a lack of solid evidence that could prove it otherwise.

Plácido era un abolicionista de viejo abolengo que bien podía convencerse de la viabilidad que tenía todas las señas de haber sido iniciado y sostenido oficialmente nada menos que por la Gran Bretaña [ . . .] Pero no es muy probable no solo por las razones documentales mencionadas [ . . .] (negación por parte de Plácido y afirmación de Jigó [sic] de que su amigo había rechazado la invitación) sino además por la

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<sup>28</sup> It needs to be noted again here that though Manzano eventually was acquitted of any conspiratorial charges, his poetic voice was literally silenced as he turned his attentions more towards the profession of confectionery and away from writing altogether as he never wrote again after being released from his imprisonment in 1845. (see Azougarh 13 and Moliner in *Obras* 230)

<sup>29</sup>In the transcripts of the proceedings and in Castellano's book, the more phonetic Spanish spelling 'Jingo' is preferred.(See Castellanos 124).

situación anímica e ideológica en que se encontraba el poeta, [. . .]

Aunque abolicionista y separatista convencido Plácido no creía que la

hora había llegado para una acción como la que proponía Jigó [sic]. (128)

In essence, Castellanos contends that Plácido either did not fully believe in the objectives proposed by the other conspirators, or, trying to remain uncommitted while at the same time loyal to his friend Gigaut, in the end was caught between the two extremes. He admits that there is too much evidence to rule out his total innocence and ignorance of the conspiracy and that his poetry bears the marks of separatist and abolitionist sentiment, but that it was the ambiguity of Plácido's politics that made him such a dangerous figure to the colonial government and ultimately sealed his fate.

Y, sin embargo, dada la estructura clasista y racial de la sociedad cubana y su corrompido sistema judicial, pudiera en cierto modo decirse que Plácido escogió conscientemente su destino cuanto decidió poner pluma al servicio de la igualdad, la justicia y la libertad. Él se declaró enemigo de un régimen absolutista. Y no hay régimen absolutista que permita esos despliegues de independencia personal. [. . .] el régimen esclavista destruyó a su adversario, al joven poeta mulato que tanto lo molestaba con sus irónicos dardos, su independencia y su rebeldía. Plácido fue mártir pues. Víctima Y mártir. Porque él era muy criollo, muy cubano, muy liberal. (136)



Although Castellano's championing of Cuban poet may seem excessively subjective and ideologically motivated, Castellanos neither completely exonerates Plácido nor over-hyperbolizes his involvement as a heroic effort against tyranny and oppression. Instead, he portrays Plácido as an ambiguous figure whose greatest threat to the Spanish regime ultimately came through his poetry, as it represented a potential form of rebellion against Spanish Colonial authority.

Daisy Cué Fernández comes to nearly the same conclusion though she is more objective than Castellanos in her views and analysis as she considers the impact of his verses on the outcome of the Conspiracy. Stating that his erratic pattern of travel in the years leading up to his final arrest and judgment indicate a high level of involvement, she also acknowledges that he could not have been a leader of such a vast conspiracy as he was accused. He may have taken a more sublime, cerebral role, as he was acutely conscious of his status in the process. As the following paragraph indicates, Plácido may have been well aware of exactly what his role was in the conspiracy, though for good reason he professed his innocence up to the moment of his death.

Las acusaciones hechas contra él durante el juicio lo señalaban como uno de los principales cabecillas de negros y mestizos; sin embargo, en mi opinión, esto es cierto solo en parte. Me inclino a pensar que su papel dentro de la conspiración fue sobre todo el de propagandista y enlace, sin desechar la hipótesis de que, por estas mismas funciones ocupara un

lugar importante dentro de dicho comité. Plácido conocía el valor de la literatura como vehículo transmisor de ideas o enardecedor de sentimientos, y resulta llamativa la publicación [. . .] de un poema como “El juramento”, canto abierto al tiranicidio, que [. . .] debe haber causado gran impacto entre los lectores, sin contar con que las autoridades españolas lo utilizaron en 1844 como prueba contra él. (102)

Agreeing with Paquette and Castellanos, Cué Fernández finds that in reality, the only clear evidence the Spanish Colonial authorities had against Plácido aside from his association with various conspirators and other circumstantial evidence was his status as a poet – not an organizer of seditious acts, but rather a communicator of radical ideas. Plácido’s poetry represented a larger threat than if he had actually been a conspiratorial leader.

Or did it? What poems did he write that overtly threatened Spanish authority and could be used against him as evidence of treason? How did his poetry serve as propaganda and how was he able to express abolitionist and separatist sentiment to “enardecer” or inflame strong feelings against slavery and Spanish colonial rule? The answers to these important questions are really not found in Paquette, Cué Fernández and Horrego Estuch’s research as all arrive at their conclusions through broad generalizations about his poetic work. Though upon closer scrutiny, as my analysis will show, especially when considered in context with his involvement in the Escalera Conspiracy and in light of his counter-Creole discourse, Plácido’s poetry can be read as a subtle cry for

rebellion and social change, that read by those who understood the social and historical contexts he wrote about, would have been seen as dangerous. We'll see that it does contain a very meticulous and carefully planned out effort to undermine Spanish authority and in some cases, even incite rebellion. Such effort would have been difficult for him to do outside of Cuba as he lacked the sponsorship of intellectuals like Domingo Del Monte or a Felix Varela who could circulate his texts abroad. Due to the strict censorship imposed by the Spanish Colonial authority, such rebellious appeals would be impossible to do on the island itself unless they were just as carefully and meticulously disguised and hidden as they were written.

In truth, Plácido's poetry is just as ambiguous as was his character and personal life. There is very little that overtly cries for any kind of radical social reform or political change. He comments on the society in which he lived but is very careful to never directly accuse or threaten the Spanish Colonial authority. As mentioned previously, he constantly had to worry about censorship as his work would never leave the confines of the island. Anything he had to say that was contrary to the Spanish regime or was reformist in nature is therefore out of necessity carefully veiled and subtle – even hidden and disguised – a fact which was completely lost on the readers and critics of his time and was the very reason his works passed the censors. In her book *Sugar's Secrets* Vera Kutzinsky writes that

Although Plácido's fame among nineteenth century readers – that is, when they did not confuse him with Manzano – rested largely on the sensational aspects of his life and on his late “prison poems” . . . It would seem that the subtleties of Plácido's work have eluded his readers as persistently they did the colonial government's censors. (85)

As Kutzinski points out, Plácido's poems were crafted very carefully so as to not call direct attention to him. He expresses his strong opinions on almost every aspect of Cuban society, but does so in ways that appear benign in first glance and cursory readings of his texts that don't take into account the “non-lettered” oral context of his poetry and thus overlook the greater discourse he communicates. This is also why the case against him relied on innuendo and circumstance – it had to – as there was no direct evidence of his involvement in any conspiracy or any direct indictments against the Spanish Colonial authority in his poetry. Even his most controversial poems, when taken out of the socio-political context in which they were written and construed, are non-specific and even “banal” (Fischer 93), and could hardly be used as an indictment against him by themselves. “El Juramento” is a prime example of this. While the poem appears to decry slavery, oppression and tyranny, it is not rife with individual accusations, does not specifically condemn Cuba or Spain for that matter, and only suggests the action of one individual, not the people as a whole. In and of itself it is ambiguous and un-precise.

A la sombra de un árbol empinado

Que está de un ancho valle a la salida,  
Hay una fuente que a beber convida  
De su líquido puro y argentado:

Allí fui yo por mi deber llamado  
Y haciendo altar la tierra endurecida,  
Ante el sagrado código de vida,  
Extendidas mis manos, he jurado:

Ser enemigo eterno del tirano,  
Manchar, si me es posible, mis vestidos  
Con su execrable sangre, por mi mano

Derramarla con golpes repetidos;  
Y morir a las manos del verdugo

Si es necesario, por romper el yugo. (Valdés, *Poesías Selectas*<sup>30</sup>, 300)

Aesthetically, this poem adheres to romantic imagery and ideals, and on its face presents a picture in the first two stanzas of a serene location where the poetic voice goes to a remote valley to drink from the “silvery” (argentado) waters of a “pure” (puro) fountain. There he builds an altar and swears an oath to be an

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<sup>30</sup> When possible, I have used the 1886 version of Plácido’s *Poesías Completas*, however it is not as complete as the title leads us to believe as several of Plácido’s compositions, including “El Juramento” are missing from the volume. In this case, I have consulted *Poesías Selectas de Plácido* (1930).

enemy against “tyranny” (el tirano) and to do whatever possible to “break the yoke” (romper el yugo) of this tyranny and oppression, even if that means extreme violence and death at the hand of “the executioner” (el verdugo). The violent imagery is striking and colorful, but non-specific. The “tirano” and “yugo” are not overtly identified, nor is the location of the valley – giving no clues as to exactly what the poetic voice refers. It is only after understanding the context in which the poem was conceived does the reader even begin to understand how volatile and dangerous this poem was not only for Plácido as an individual, but for the Spanish government in Cuba. According to Horrego Estuch

Se cuenta que una tarde, con unos amigos, fue al Abra de Yurumí,  
y, al transponer la angostura, en presencia de una fuente o surtidor  
de agua potable, teniendo por escenario el bellísimo panorama, se  
se le invitó a que improvisara contra la esclavitud. Así lo hizo, y de sus  
labios salieron los versos de “El Juramento” (55)

Combined with the context that the poem was improvised “contra la esclavitud” was the reception of the poem and its subsequent popularity in the public. Also, the oral nature of the poem cannot be underemphasized<sup>31</sup>. As most of his poetry, this poem was given in answer to a request regarding a specific subject, in this case, slavery. At the onset of the improvisation it wasn’t primarily intended to be published in written form, but memorized, recited and repeated. As such it

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<sup>31</sup> Plácido was highly renowned as an improvisational poet, winning several competitions and was exceptionally accomplished at improvising poems given a “pie forbade” or a random phrase upon which he was challenged to construct a sonnet or “decimal” (see Horrego Estuch, 63-68, 104 -106, ). This is also perhaps why he was so harshly criticized as well and an area of his poetry that is widely unexplored. See also Fischer’s *Modernity Disavowed*.

circulated in the Cuban consciousness with wide popularity, something that apparently Plácido himself took advantage of, and which ultimately proved to be a motivating factor in his imprisonment and prosecution. Again Horrego Estuch records that

Este soneto sirvió como un motivo más de acusación en el causa de “La Escalera”. En el subsuelo se repetía de memoria, por el pueblo, asustando a la autoridad española, inquieta siempre por el más leve rumor de protesta antiesclavista, por lo que representaba de entorpecimiento en engranaje político. En este mismo lugar, yendo Plácido [. . .] años más tarde, el poeta rememorando el pasado, [. . .] recitó el soneto con la desafiante sonoridad de su voz, enardecida por el motivo de la composición. (56)

Given this background it is obvious that Plácido himself, the Cuban public, and the Spanish authorities understood very well that “El Juramento” was an outcry against slavery, the Spanish regime and colonialism. Though the poem generically condemns tyranny and exalts liberty, very common themes in the hegemonic romantic discourse and poetry of the time (Fischer 97), Plácido takes advantage of the public’s awareness of the poem to give his verses more power and a definite context. And whether or not it was his ultimate intention, in doing so he incites and inflames (“enardece”) public perception against Spanish rule as recorded by both Horrego Estuch and Cué Fernández. Though it was used against him as evidence by the Spanish colonial tribunal, the poem itself was not

enough to indict him on its face alone and had to be combined with other circumstantial evidence, questionable testimony, and contrived confession to justify his prosecution and death sentence. Just like Plácido himself, the poem is just ambiguous enough to be considered benign, yet powerful enough to be dangerous and inflammatory all at once. Though they worried that his poetry presented a challenge to their authority, colonial officials allowed his poems to be published because they were disguised just enough to appear harmless, when if understood in the proper contexts, could very well constitute sedition.

In her analysis of Plácido Sibylle Fischer identifies this aspect of his poetry as a discourse of the abject<sup>32</sup>. Subscribing to Julia Kristeva's notion that the abject is a form of psychic rejection of the symbolic order of law (in this case the white Creole nationalist discourse) that does not allow closure and is expressed as a form of ambiguity or disruption of that which constitutes the subject and posits it back within the realm of hegemony, she concludes that because Plácido's work does not adhere to the norms of the hegemonic discourses either structurally, aesthetically, or precisely thematically, his work represents a transgression of the law, and as such places him on the outside of the nineteenth century Cuban hegemonic discourses, a subject of the abject, thrown aside and not just rejected by hegemony but aborted by it.

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<sup>32</sup> Fischer quotes Kristeva's essay "The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection" (see Works Cited), and explains that the essay was written as "a post-structuralist companion piece to Freud's essay on the uncanny". For further discussion see *Modernity Disavowed* 89-91.



As a subject of the discourse of the abject, Plácido mixes what culture has happily separated. He is not a pre-modern poet or a poet who by chance continued practices of an obsolete past, but the poet of regression and decomposition. [. . .] Plácido is neither innovator nor traditionalist. He is transgressive precisely because he neither submits to the law nor overthrows it. He represents what humans are prior to successful subjectification. [. . .] Plácido becomes the ghost that reminds us what lies beyond the boundaries that came to define Creole culture, a reminder of all that was ruled out in the cultural processes on the nineteenth century. (90-91)

For Fischer, Plácido's poetry represents a rupture of the symbolic order present in early nineteenth century Cuban letters. Due to his race, social status and lack of formal education and training, Plácido stands on the outside of the Law and his poetry constitutes an "excess [. . .] that stems from the fact that it cannot be contained in the political and aesthetic categories of historiography and literary history that developed in the course of the nineteenth century" (80). It is ambiguous not because it doesn't fit within the parameters set forth by hegemony but because it does not and yet appears to do so all at the same time. Fischer further concludes that Plácido's work constitutes a disavowed modernity for these very reasons. The convergence of his politics and poetry transgressed the boundaries of the symbolic order and ultimately cost him his life, but in doing so, made his voice and life even more poignant and meaningful.

While Fischer's analysis of Plácido focuses on the political consequences of his ultimate "silencing" she does identify the essence of Plácido's poetry and discourse and precisely what makes it most remarkable and memorable. It is an interstitial discourse that appears in form and substance to be like the dominant discourses, yet it does not follow the rules of hegemony and expresses itself in the form of ambivalence. And it is only in and through this ambivalence that Plácido is best understood and why he is still such a controversial figure not only in Cuban letters but throughout the Caribbean and Latin America as well and why his poetry was misunderstood and overlooked by critics in both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### ***Jicoténcal* and the Emergence of a Counter-Creole Discourse**

The poem that in my opinion most exemplifies this ambivalent mimicry of hegemonic discourses in which Heredia participated is Plácido's critically acclaimed (Kutzinsky 85) "Jicoténcal". This poem shares its title with what is often regarded as the first historic novel in Latin America. The author of the novel however is unknown as it was printed anonymously in Philadelphia in 1826. Many critics have speculated as to the authorship of the novel but most recent criticism has limited the possible authorship to one of only two writers; either the catholic priest Félix Varela or Heredia. While this question is still up for debate and deserves more critical attention, it is largely irrelevant to my current analysis. However, an understanding of the arguments for and against both Varela and Heredia aid in understanding the fascination of this work to the Cuban authors of

this time period and especially their revolutionary identification with the title character Jicoténcal. This will also help to identify Plácido's interest on the subject and show his position relative to the revolutionary ideas of the hegemonic discourse, giving a broader understanding of his poem and discourse.

Based largely on the historical accounts of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas and Antonio de Solis, the novel tells the story of the conquest of México by Hernán Cortés with the help of the republic of Tlaxcala, led by the young warrior Xicohténcatl<sup>33</sup> (spelled Jicoténcal in both the novel and the poem). Printed by William Staveland Press of Philadelphia in 1826, the book was never registered by an author, but by a proprietor, Frederick Huttner, causing debate of its authorship seemingly from its very conception. The list of critics and scholars who have debated the authorship of this novel is quite long and distinguished and includes names such as Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Ralph Warner, D.W. McPheeters, José Rojas Garcidueñas, Enrique Anderson Imbert, Rodolfo J. Cortina, Luis Leal and more recently, Alejandro González Acosta and Melissa L. Garland. The two leading voices that have emerged from this argument however are those of Leal and Acosta who advocate for Varela and Heredia respectively and have both

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<sup>33</sup> Though this spelling is most grammatically correct and more commonly accepted in current scholarly writing about the actual historical figure, both in the book and in the poem the spelling Jicoténcal is used, and for the purposes of my analysis I will use the latter as I will be referring to the literary character rather than the historical figure. The alternate spelling Xicohténcatl is used at times as well by other scholars including Leal and Acosta when speaking of Baamonde's 1831 novel.

published editions of the text attributing the novel to these nineteenth century masters individually<sup>34</sup>.

Leal's work in the introduction of the edition that he and Cortina attribute to Varela (1995), is important to the overall study of the novel and narrows the authorship down to only a handful of individuals who could have written it, including Heredia and Varela. Leal goes on then to eliminate these possible authors one by one with solid reasoning and analysis and in the end concludes that Varela is the most likely author, basing his findings on the proximity in Philadelphia of Varela to Huttner (they lived just a few doors apart) and on orthographic, stylistic and grammatical analyses to other known works of Varela. He is hasty to dismiss Heredia however, for several reasons. First, he reasons that by the year 1826, Heredia was already living in México and since he had not been in Philadelphia since 1824, would have been unable to publish the book there. Secondly, to reason thematically against Heredia he argues that the novel is of lesser literary quality than Heredia was capable of and accustomed to writing and also lacked the literary influences shown in some of Heredia's other works. He states

En general, el estilo cuidadoso y correcto de Heredia no tiene semejanza alguna con el afrancesado y a veces incorrecto autor del *Jicoténcal*.

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<sup>34</sup> Aside from the obvious differences in the introductory and supplemental materials (Acosta's edition also contains an edition of *Xicoténcal, príncipe Americano*, the novel written by the Spanish author Salvador García Baaamonde in 1831 as an answer to the 1826 novel) minor orthographic and punctuation changes to enhance the modernization of the work, both editions of the text inherently follow the 1826 original version nearly word for word – including the italicization of passages copied directly from Solís. For convenience throughout this chapter, all quotations from the text of the novel are taken exclusively from Leal and Cortina's 1995 edition.

Además, Heredia conocía bien la obra de Walter Scott y [. . .] no hay influencia del novelista escocés. (25)

This quick dismissal however is disputed by Acosta who in his book *El Enigma de Jicoténcal* (1997) argues that despite this seemingly contradictory statement, Heredia cannot be ruled out as the author of the novel. Instead of limiting the possibility to Varela only, Acosta acknowledges Leal's argument but points out that the reasons why it could be Heredia greatly outnumber all the reasons why it could not. He then enumerates these possibilities in a very careful and detailed analysis resulting in a coherent and engaging argument. Particularly convincing is his presentation of specific phrases in the novel that appear both in Heredia's other works on Mexico and in the chronicles of Solís, the source of Heredia's study of the historical figure Xicohténcatl (Acosta, *Enigma* 144-148). Likewise, as was previously mentioned, in 2002 Acosta also published a version of the novel attributing it to Heredia and to date, Acosta is the scholar that by far has most comprehensively studied the argument and presents the greatest number of logical arguments advocating for any one author. In the introduction to his edition of the novel Acosta claims that "hoy no queda duda alguna para reconocerla como obra del poeta cubano José María Heredia" (7). And while the question of the novel's authorship may be answered for Acosta, the debate is not completely closed however, as other scholars continue to discuss the subject.

Most recently, in her article "The Authorship of *Jicoténcal*" (2005) Melissa L. Garland makes a strong case for Varela, building and expanding on Leal's

earlier work. She argues that the novel bears strong linguistic and stylistic resemblance to Varela's lesser known works as well as perspective and coherent thought process. However Garland is not as definitive in her conclusions as is Acosta and while she does acknowledge Acosta's work in a footnote, she does not engage Acosta's text nor dispute his findings as Acosta does with Leal. In her effort to bolster support for the Varela hypothesis, she brings up some of the very same arguments that Acosta uses to support his claim for Heredia, and without complete exclusion of one of these authors, the question may never be completely answered. Nevertheless, it is clear that the thought process in the novel follows the same direction of the white Creole nationalist discourse perpetuated by Del Monte, Heredia and Varela and as I will further examine, and therefore unequivocally advocates for a very different Cuba than was experienced by Plácido.

While the question of exact authorship of *Jicoténcal* goes largely unanswered, other questions surrounding this novel have definitively been answered. Logically, the most obvious of these and the most relevant to Plácido's reason for writing about Xicohténcatl is this: why would these Cuban authors be interested in a book and a historical figure from the conquest of México? Leal addresses this subject most directly in the introduction to his and Cortina's edition of the novel as he recognizes it as a work clearly meant to decry Spanish colonial authority in Cuba by retelling the conquest within a nineteenth century frame of understanding through the nascent genre of the historical novel

under the tenants of late Neo-classicism and early Romanticism, an issue that was certainly a concern to the authors associated with the white Creole discourse. Talking about the past in México allowed them to reflect on their Cuban actuality without directly talking about Cuba and Spanish colonial authority. Through the characters and dialogue of the novel however, this seemingly hidden agenda becomes all too apparent and dangerous, so much so as Leal suggests, that the author doesn't even identify himself perhaps out of fear of Spanish reprisal. To bolster his argument for Varela he goes so far as to propose an allegorical reading of the text that identifies closely with what Varela had written in other texts. Though he cautions to not take the allegory too literally and that it cannot be applied universally throughout the book, he does stress that the parallels he identifies coincide not only with the thoughts of Félix Varela, but also of the collective conscience of the authors associated with the hegemonic discourse of the time period.

Su identificación con su personaje Jicoténcal, el histórico Xicoténcatl, el Mozo es indiscutible, ya que éste nunca cejó en su clamor porque Tlaxcala se enfrentara a Hernán Cortés. Maxiscatzin es su Arango y Parreño, el traidor a la independencia de su patria. Cortés es su Fernando VII, cruel, astuto y engañoso. Tlaxcala es Cuba, Fray Bartolomé, la Iglesia Católica [. . .] Diego de Ordaz es su Alcalá Galiano y Teutila su gran amor patrio a la libertad. (Leal 34)

To be certain, the novel does not try to disguise the fact that it condemns the Spanish conquest of México and metaphorically, that of the entire Americas including Cuba. The famous first line assures the reader that the book is not just talking about México and that it makes no excuses for the cruelty of the conquest. “Estaba escrita en el libro fatal del destino la caída del grande imperio de Moctezuma, bajo cuyas ruinas debían sepultarse *la república de Tlascala y otros gobiernos de una hermosa parte de la América*” (Varela<sup>35</sup> 3 - emphasis mine). The clever use of the words “fatal”, “destino”, “ruinas”, and “sepultarse” along with the inclusion of Tlascala and “otros gobiernos” without even mentioning the word México, create an image that portrays the entire conquest and communicate to the reader immediately that this book is more than just a story about México and opens the door for allegorical interpretation. If it is not evident enough from this first passage that Leal’s analysis of the book as an allegory will prove to be true then a quick reading of the first section of the book will remove any doubt.

This first section therefore describes a scene that takes place at a gathering of all the Tlascalán leaders who are debating the merits of allying their nation with the armies of Cortés while Cortés ambassadors await their decision. Each leader takes his turn speaking to the group, advocating his position carefully and meticulously. Magiscatzin, who Leal identified as a traitor, speaks

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<sup>35</sup> Though I have asserted along with Acosta that the novel *Jicoténcal* was most likely written by Heredia, I have consulted editions of the text attributed to both authors and found them to be virtually identical, so for convenience sake I will cite the text from the edition attributed to Varela. See footnote 14.



first and tries to convince the group that they should ally themselves with Cortés. In response to his pleadings, however the elder Jicoténcal represents the voice of wisdom and experience and embodies all the liberal Latin American attitudes towards Spanish colonial authority present in the Creole hegemonic discourse in his indictment against the proposed unification. His words are both a prophetic warning and a summation of the events of conquest that had already taken place. Speaking of Cortés' proposal and of Cortés himself he counsels:

Esa benignidad que se nos pondera es una hipocresía atroz y abominable. Su lenguaje es este: 'Yo vengo a esclavizaros a vosotros vuestro pensamiento, vuestros hijos y vuestra descendencia; vengo a destruir vuestro culto y a haceros apostatar de vuestra religión – vengo a violar vuestras mujeres y vuestras hijas; vengo robaros cuanto poseéis si os sometéis gustosos a tanto envilecimiento. [ . . . ] Así lo han hecho en Cozumel, en Tabasco, en Cempoala *y en los demás países que el destino ha condenado a sufrir su presencia.*(Varela 10 – emphasis mine)

As the elder statesman approximates and characterizes the speech of the invading Cortés, his prophetic vision overtly espouses and resumes centuries of historical analyses of the conquest that in truth could not be voiced until much later on in the future and after much intellectual preponderance. Again, it is apparent that he is not just referring to México as the italicized portion of the quote indicates. In Leal's reading "los demás países que el destino ha condenado a sufrir su presencia" refers directly to Cuba. To make this point even

more concrete, the next paragraph introduces the metaphoric dichotomy that Moctezuma equates to Cortés, which in turn applies to Spanish Colonial authority over Cuba.

¿Quién nos asegura que esos vasallos de un tirano no se asociarán con Moctezuma, cuyo despotismo es más análogo a su manera de gobierno? [. . .] Creedme, compañeros: jamás una nación hizo favores y beneficios a otra; el interés las conduce en sus relaciones recíprocas, y solamente la que más adelanta en la perfección es justa con los demás. Esa generosidad, esas benéficas intenciones, ese bien nuestro que los saca de sus hogares, todas esas son expresiones de un arte desconocido en estos climas y que, o me engaño mucho o es más infernal y diabólico que sus armas de fuego. (Varela 10)

Once again, here the metaphor is obvious. The elder Jicoténcal calls both Cortés and Fernando VII by extension, tyrants (“un tirano”) and associates them directly with Moctezuma. Overtly so they are one in the same and their words and discourse, which he regards as more dangerous weapons than their firearms, are full of lies and sanctimony that will can only ultimately lead to certain cultural and societal destruction. Transferring these ideas from sixteenth century occurrences in México and applying them to nineteenth century Cuba with the aid of history and liberal thought was hardly a stretch for the purveyors of Cuban Creole nationalism. It was an analysis that made sense and perfectly described their situation. It could have as easily been voiced by Saco, Jimeno, Del Monte or

Varela as well as Heredia and was certainly espoused by them all as the history of the novel so readily teaches. It is for this reason as well that for the book to survive it had to have been published outside of Cuba as such overt criticism of Spanish rule would certainly not have been tolerated, and even possessing it would have proven dangerous – a fact that to the members of the Del Monte group made the study of the text even more compelling.

For Plácido this analysis and allegoric identification with México's past and his own Cuban reality would also hold true and be just as irresistible. Though it is unlikely that he would have read the novel, which was published in the U.S. and in reality only carefully circulated there and other parts of Latin America and perhaps never in Cuba, it is evident that he understood and shared many of these same ideas and their allegorical implications. Without any concrete evidence suggesting otherwise, it would be irresponsible to assume that the book ever passed through Plácido's hands for perusal, though a careful reading of the poem does exhibit many of the same themes and it is evident that this topic was firmly etched in the collective conscious of the authors associated with the Del Monte circle and the white Creole nationalist discourse. This means that Plácido would have most likely been privy to significant conversation and discussion of the novel and would have shared many of the same viewpoints, though his approach to the topic may have been shaded by the different way he experienced colonial life and society. Certainly however, he would not be able to write about these ideas as overtly as they are expressed in the novel and if he

wanted to touch on them at all, would have had to take a more clandestine and veiled approach that could readily be provided through the force of poetry.

As pointed out previously, Plácido's education and knowledge of history consisted in gleaning bits and pieces of information from a variety of different sources. In response to the hegemonic *Jicoténcal* the novel, whose source was mainly Solís, it appears that Plácido uses Bernal Diaz's *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* and Fray Bartolomé de Las Casa's *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* as source material for his poem. Since he cannot appropriate the dominant discourse from the exact same hegemonic standpoint, and due to the constraints of censorship, he has to be more subtle, and broach these subjects surreptitiously to make his criticism fit within the parameters of a poem that would not only decry Spanish authority and suggest rebellion, but would also pass the censors. To do this he first has to identify with the figure of the historical Xicohténcal as a figure separated from Spanish authority and thus describes his triumphant defeat of Moctezuma as a glorious victory for Tlaxcala – without mentioning Spain at all.

Dispersas van por los campos

Las tropas de Moctezuma,

Lamentando de sus dioses

El poco favor y ayuda.

Mientras ceñida la frente

De azules y blancas plumas,

Sobre un palanquín de oro  
Que finas perlas dibujan,  
Tan brillantes, que la vista,  
Heridas del Sol, deslumbran,  
Entra glorioso en Tlascala  
El joven que de ellas triunfa.  
Himnos le dan de victoria,  
Y de aromas le perfuman  
Guerreros que le rodean,  
Y el pueblo que le circunda;  
A que contestan alegres  
Trescientas vírgenes puras  
- << Baldón y afrenta al vencido,  
Loor y Gloria al que triunfa>> - (Valdés *Poesías Completas* 144)

Here, in the beginning of the poem, the poetic Jicoténcal appears as the glorious victor over the troops of Moctezuma without any association whatsoever with the Spanish conquistadors. There is no mention of Cortés, nor the Spanish crown. The victory over Moctezuma is portrayed as a purely Tlaxcalan success and the image of Spain and its tyranny is only inferred through the actual known history of the event. By this obvious omission, Plácido successfully separates his poetic Jicoténcal from Spanish rule on its outward face and allows himself to talk covertly about Spanish colonial authority. This in turn opens up the poem to the

possibility of a greater discussion relevant to Plácido's greater concern; that of a colonized nation gaining freedom by overcoming its stronger foreign seated master government, and managing its affairs in a better, more peaceful and civilized way, without talking about it directly, which in the same way the novel does, is the direction the poem soon takes.

Hasta la espaciosa plaza  
Llega, donde le saludan  
Los ancianos senadores  
Y gracias mil le tributan  
Mas ¿por qué veloz el héroe  
Atropellando la turba,  
Del palanquín salta, y vuela  
Cual rayo que el éter surca?  
Es, que ya del caracol  
Que por las valles retumba,  
A los prisioneros <<muerte...>>  
En eco sonante anuncia.  
Suspende a lo lejos horrida  
La hoguera su llama fúlgida,  
De humanas víctimas ávida  
Que bajan sus frentes mustias.  
Llega: los suyos al verle

Cambian en placer la furia,  
Y de las enhiestas picas  
Vuelven al suelo las puntas.  
- << ¡Perdón!>> - exclama, y arroja  
Su collar: los brazos cruzan  
Aquellos míseros seres  
Que vida por él disfrutan. (144 – 145)

As Jicoténcal jumps down from his elevated perch and runs towards the prisoners who have been sentenced to death, he shows he is definitely a leader of action and compassion as he saves their lives instead of allowing a death sentence to be passed upon them, a stark contrast to the perceived cruelty of Moctezuma and by extension, Cortés. Next, he issues a clear challenge to Moctezuma condemning his tyranny and proclaiming himself as not only a superior military leader but as a ruler as well, all in the same breath. And though he never overtly mentions Cortés, the comparison between the two is unmistakable. The presence of Cortés looms large as Jicoténcal describes Moctezuma's way of ruling, describing him in the same way the novel describes Cortés – cruel and despotic. In essence the poem suggests that Cortés and Moctezuma are one and the same, condemning them both at the same time yet never overtly mentioning Spanish authority.

- << Tornad a Méjico, esclavos;  
Nadie vuestra marcha turba,

Y decid a vuestro dueño  
Vencido ya veces muchas,  
Que el joven Jicoténcal  
Crueldades como él no usa.  
Ni con sangre de cautivos  
Asesino el suelo inunda.  
Que el cacique de Tlascala  
Ni batir ni quemar gusta  
Tropas dispersas e inermes,  
Sino con armas, y juntas.  
Que arme flecheros más bravos  
Y me encontrará en la lucha,  
Con solo una pica mía  
Por cada trescientas tuyas:  
Que tema el instante aciago  
Que mi enojo a punto suba;  
Entonces, ni sobre el trono  
Su vida estará segura:  
Y que si los puentes corta  
Porque no vaya en su busca,  
Con cráneos de sus guerreros  
Calzada haré en la Laguna.>>-



Dijo, y marchóse al banquete

Do está la nobleza junta, (145)

With this challenge the young warrior–chief Jicoténcal asserts his dominance over Moctezuma with hyperbolic exuberance and though he points out that he doesn't use the same brand of cruelty associated with Moctezuma, the exaggerated violence he does promise is very gruesome and complete, suggesting several things and alluding to both Moctezuma and Cortés. First, Plácido, through the voice of Jicoténcal calls the captured warriors “esclavos” and refers to Moctezuma as their “dueño” and it is undoubtedly not by accident that he does so. In doing so, Plácido condemns the practice used by both Moctezuma and Cortés of using captured opponents as warriors and hired assassins as well as the institution of slavery, in Mexica and Spanish society itself.

By referencing Moctezuma in this way and exalting the figure of Jicoténcal in direct contradiction to this portrayal of the Mexica leader, Plácido takes the record of the chroniclers like Bernal Díaz, who overtly championed Cortés and the Spaniards and sought to justify the conquest, the encomienda system and slavery through their writings, and turns the record on its head. Now, instead of championing Spanish rule and Colonial authority, he champions Jicoténcal and some of the same republican ideals championed by the novel. The captured prisoners are set free but carry a warning with them back to Moctezuma that alludes to the perceived treachery of the infamous “Noche Triste” in which prior

to an attack on the Spanish troops and their allies, the Mexica eliminated several of the main bridges leading across Lake Texcoco forcing Cortés' troops to cross a makeshift causeway to escape Tenochtitlán and suffer heavy casualties in the process. Though Plácido makes a mistake that contradicts the actually historical record here as it was not Moctezuma who actually orchestrated the "Noche Triste" massacre but Cuauhtémoc, Jicoténcal's warning to Moctezuma characterizes the Mexica leader as being perfectly capable of committing the same brand of treachery and condemns him as a despot, while the act of freeing the prisoners does the exact opposite for Jicoténcal. Though he threatens the same kind of violence of which he accuses Moctezuma, he clearly demonstrates that he will not resort to that level of warfare unless forced to and in doing so maintains a sense of civility and moral superiority over the Mexica ruler.

Both Cortés and Moctezuma, representing the Spanish and Mexica governments respectively, are supplanted by the figure of Jicoténcal who, in his language and actions, represents republican ideals – as opposed to the figures of Cortés and Moctezuma who represent tyranny – and creates a clear dichotomy that separates them along lines of good and evil. Just as in the novel, in the same allegorical sense Cortés (as well as Fernando VII) and Moctezuma are one and the same. Through his harsh criticism of Cortés and the brutal history of the conquest, Plácido decries his present Cuban situation as well, criticizing Fernando VII and Spanish Colonial authority at the same time. If there

is any doubt, Plácido punctuates this dichotomy in the final stanza as he references Jicoténcal's death, perpetrated by Cortés.

Más como sobre la tierra  
No hay dicha completa nunca,  
Vinieron atrás los tiempos  
Que eclipsaron su ventura,  
Y fue tan triste su muerte,  
Que aun hoy se ignora la tumba  
De aquel ante cuya clava  
Barreada de áureas puntas  
Huyeron despavoridas  
Las tropas de Moctezuma.(146)

Though he is never mentioned by name in the poem, this final stanza refers directly to Cortés, who, in the novel, after capturing Jicoténcal in battle ordered his quick trial and subsequent execution. In this description however, Plácido understates the events instead of hyperbolizing them as he has done throughout the rest of the poem. The only direct description he gives of Jicoténcal's death are the words "tan triste" but accentuates this by reminding the reader that the figure of Jicoténcal has been all but forgotten by history as a major factor in the conquest of México as his role has been surpassed by the fame of the roles of Cortés and Moctezuma. The simple statement "no hay dicha completa nunca, vinieron atrás los tiempos, que eclipsaron su ventura, y fue tan

triste su muerte, que aún hoy se ignora la tumba” greatly undervalues the significance of the actual Xicohténcal’s betrayal by Cortés and the violence of his assassination. Though he triumphed gloriously over Moctezuma, as Plácido reminds us in the last few lines, this glory could not last (“no hay dicha completa nunca”) as the ultimate control over his life belonged to Cortés, figuratively selling himself in bondage to the conquistador the moment he agrees to ally himself with the Spanish troops – revealing the great ironic truth of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. By juxtaposing the over-hyperbolized image of Jicoténcal and his victory over Moctezuma’s troops with the understated image of his death at the hands of Cortés, Plácido very subtly reminds the reader that in regards to the conquest, in the end, all authority is usurped, all autonomy is stolen, and all civilization is enslaved and dominated by the cruel and despotic European masters. Just like the prophetic statements of the elder Jicoténcal found more overtly in the more candid novel, the poem subtly warns against any association with Spain and its representative Colonial government.

For Cuba this message is clear, in the same allegorical fashion as the novel *Jicoténcal* suggests – the Cuban people must posit themselves in opposition to the despotic Spanish authority. Yet, true to his ambiguous nature, Plácido’s message also fails to propose a clear plan of action for the people to follow to do so. Instead, they are left to ponder the nature of the Tlascalán warrior-chief and his unfortunate death. And because he does not overtly suggest rebellion, but lauds the qualities of Jicoténcal as ruler of a once free and

proud nation, he champions the cause of freedom over that of independence. What is left then is a subtle cry for this freedom veiled by a well-crafted piece of poetry that cannot be used to indict him directly in any conspiratorial action. Without a clear understanding of the history of the conquest and the discursive contradictions produced by the juxtaposed images of the hyperbolized description of Jicoténcal's triumph vis à vis his understated execution and historic legacy introduced in the last stanza of the poem, "Jicoténcal" only appears as another romantic treatise on the history of México. Herein lies however, the essence of Plácido's counter-Creole discourse. While he appears to be speaking about México and the image of the plantation is seemingly absent, in reality he is speaking directly about Cuba and its colonial plantation economy. Just as in his other poems, the theme of plantation slavery, while veiled and relegated to the background, is a presence that is constantly felt. While he appears to be writing a romantic poem that imitates the popular style of the times, he is forging his own discourse between the lines of this hegemony and counter to it at the same time.

### **María Cristina and the Mulatto Poet – Plácido's Laudatory and Political Poems and the Counter-Creole Discourse**

México was not however the only country or theme Plácido used as a backdrop to talk about the social and political conditions in Cuba. In fact, as a closer study of the body of his work reveals in light of his counter-Creole discourse, he often referred to other countries and political situations and though it appeared he was talking about those individual subjects, he was in effect always talking about Cuba and calling for change as he did so. As Kutzinsky

readily admits, this is an element of his poetry that has been grossly under-evaluated and misunderstood (85), especially by those nineteenth century critics who could not get past the inconsistencies in his character and personal history in order to more objectively read his poetry.

One of the main indictments against Plácido expressed by Del Monte, Sanguily, Menéndez y Pelayo, Hostos and other nineteenth century critics was his apparent inconsistency in his patriotism for Cuba. He often wrote poems praising Spain while all around him in Cuba were suffering because of Spanish despotism. To this end Hostos complained that “[l]a Isla de Cuba estaba, mientras Plácido cantaba las glorias de Isabel y de Cristina, en la peor de las situaciones en que puede estar un pueblo esclavo: estaba contento de su amo” (Hostos 25). Hostos essentially blames Plácido for spreading a general feeling of contentment for the Spanish “master” (amo) among the Cuban populous, when in his own opinion, he should have been more consistently vocal against Spain. This is also the same reasoning that led Sanguily to question Plácido’s patriotism and to so vehemently declare: “Y eso lo olvida un mulato, un cubano, y un poeta, pero ¡ay! A penas era mulato, apenas era cubano, apenas era poeta” (Sanguily, “Un improvisador” 112). Even in his evaluation of Hostos’ severe criticism of this perceived ambiguity in Plácido’s poetry Buscaglia-Salgado readily admits that “[t]o be sure, Plácido wrote poems of a certain patriotic fervor or at least verses in which he condemned tyranny and called for Liberty. But he wrote many more poems in praise of the queen of Spain” (222). While this is the obvious

transparent purpose of these poems, a closer reading leads us again to question if this was truly Plácido's intent. As both Castellanos and Kutzinsky observe (Castellanos 83-91; Kutzinsky 85), Plácido actually took a very subtle approach to these poems, and as such they can't necessarily be read as simple-minded laudatory pro-Spanish propaganda. More directly to the point of this argument, Castellanos explains that Plácido's laudatory or "political poems" (55) were never exactly what they appeared to be.

Muchos críticos le han censurado al autor de tanta poesía laudatoria, sus composiciones en elogio de Doña María Cristina, de la Reina Doña Isabel II, del Gobernador de Matanzas. Desde el punto de vista estético, estos críticos tienen razón. Desde el punto de vista político, no [. . .] en ninguna parte se resume mejor la proyección ideológica y práctica del pensamiento político del autor. Casi pudiera decirse que este tipo de poesía laudatoria es el vehículo *escogido expresamente por él* para exponer sin riesgos excesivos sus ideas liberales. Burlar la rígida censura era, por aquel entonces, la primera preocupación de los que se oponían al *status quo* colonial. (Castellanos 83 – emphasis Castellanos.)

What better way to disguise criticism of Spain, and to mock the censors at the same time, than to write directly about it in praise and adulation – though great care needed to be taken to avoid appearing overly sarcastic and overtly critical. Just as we see in "Jicoténcal", however, Plácido proves to be a master of this brand of subtle poetic deception.

The two short sonnets “A Doña Isabela Segunda en su día”, and “En los días de S.M. la Reina Gobernadora” and the longer “La ambarina”, taken on face value alone, appear to have been written solely to celebrate the birthdays of the infant Queen Isabel II and her mother the Regent Queen María Cristina, the daughter and widow of Fernando VII respectively (Castellanos 84 - 86). However, a more careful reading of the texts which takes into consideration the political situation of Spain at the time and an understanding of the allusions made in the poems, reveals a much more complicated discourse functioning under the guise of praise and adulation of Spain but that in reality is always speaking specifically about Cuba and its own political situation.

In his analysis of Plácido's role as a political poet Castellanos examines these three poems and how the poet relates his political leanings through them. He comments that the poet writes these poems not to praise Spain and its royal family, but “para condenar la sublevación del Carlismo reaccionario que hacía guerra de guerrillas en el norte de la Península [ . . . ] y para predecir [ . . . ] que gracias a la joven reina, ‘libre. . . respirará España’ “ (84) and that “las palabras con que lo hace parecen sugerir que la forma adoptada no es más que un pretexto para dar salida a su mensaje liberal” (84). Building on Castellanos' argument, I contend that Plácido did in fact use these poems for that purpose but that they also display a sustained effort to criticize Spanish Colonial authority and constitute the basis for his unique counter-Creole discourse. Though all of these poems were carefully written with this same purpose in mind, the poem that



poem that communicates this discourse most powerfully is the longer poem “La ambarina” – written under the preface of celebrating the birthday of Queen María Cristina – that upon a closer inspection, can hardly be seen as a poem written to praise Spain.

Though the poem speaks of Spain inherently by referencing María Cristina directly, the first stanza carefully situates the poetic voice as Cuban, indicating that the point of view is also Cuban, which is very crucial to the message the poem ultimately conveys.

Zéfiro blando que en la arboleda

Bullendo esparces fragante olor,

Cruza los mares y da a Cristina

Esta de Cuba célica flor.

Esta, que el campo de ámbares llena

Cuando amanece fulgido el Sol,

Como ella vierte sus beneficios

Desde el excelso trono español (Valdés, *Poesías Completas* 310)

The comparison made between the “célica flor” from Cuba – that on the rising of the sun fills the countryside with amber – and María Cristina, who from her “excelso trono español”, passes down judgments that Plácido characterizes as “beneficios”, creates a metaphor that links the embattled regent Queen directly to Cuba and to Plácido’s brand of liberal thinking. Instead of just praising her for being queen, Plácido is praising her for her own liberal ideas, representing a

progressive change in Spanish politics and protesting the Carlist wars all at the same time. (Castellanos 84-86.) The next stanza confirms this praise of change and condemns the previous three hundred years of Spanish monarchism at the same time.

Cual tigre hircana voraz destroza  
Tiernas ovejas sin compasión;  
Así sedienta de sangre humana  
Reinó tres siglos la Inquisición.  
El hombre ilustre tales escenas  
Viera de ruinas y asolación,  
Sin más arbitrio que era aplaudirlas

O ser quemado por fracmasón. (Valdés *Poseías Completas* 310)

Just as previously seen in Jicoténcal, Plácido's criticism of old Spain here is vehement, and though he appears to only be speaking of Spain, in essence, he is referring indirectly to Cuba. This becomes evident as we recognize that he uses the same comparison – using the same language and words – made by Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas in 1552 in his *Brevísima relación* when the Franciscan friar described the conquest of Caribbean and the destruction of the native Carib, Arawak and Taíno cultures. Being sure to include a specific reference to Cuba in his commentary, Las Casas overtly hyperbolizes his description of this chapter of Caribbean and Spanish history to more forcefully

illustrate his point and his unmistakable condemnation of the conquest is only too evident.

En estas *ovejas* mansas y de las calidades susodichas por su Hacedor y Criador así dotadas, entraron los españoles desde luego que las conocieron como lobos, y *tigres* y leones *crudelísimos* de muchos días *hambrientos*. (Las Casas 77 – emphasis mine)

Likewise, the connection that Plácido makes to Las Casas' commentary here is just as apparent, yet also very subtle. Instead of mentioning Spain outright as Las Casas does, Plácido uses the term "la Inquisición" as a metonym, and seemingly widens the discourse to make his poem appear to speak of things happening on the Iberian Peninsula and not in Cuba. However, as he borrows Las Casas' characterization of the conquest of the Caribbean, using some of the exact same words (*tigre*; *ovejas*) and paraphrasing the rest (*sin compasión / crudelísimo*; *sedienta de sangre human / hambrientos de muchos días*), he limits the scope of the poem specifically to Cuba, makes it inherently Caribbean as it elicits images not only of the conquest itself, but of all its consequences as well, including the plantation economy that was functioning concurrently with and taking the place of the Inquisition in the Americas. In essence, "La Inquisición" is the Iberian analog to the Caribbean "plantación", and even though it is not overtly depicted in the poem, its oppressive presence is certainly felt and Plácido is appealing here to María Cristina to change the colonial "status quo" and undo the inequities of the past in the hopes of a better future for Cuba.

The irony of this stanza cannot be overlooked either. In the last half of the stanza he mentions the danger present in criticizing “la Inquisición” and that the individuals who attempted to do so were often executed or seemingly “burned at the stake” (“ser quemado por fracmasón”). Because of this, he conjectures that writers only had the option of applauding the “blood thirsty” acts of the Inquisition, or in the case of Cuba – the conquest, and Spanish authority. Pointing this out masks the fact that the poem is in fact rife with criticism of the “status quo colonial” (Castellanos 85) and disguises the mockery he is making of the censors and risking his own life as he does so. The next stanza again appears to laud Queen María Cristina, which further serves to hide the audacity of the previous one, but also highlights the era of change in Spanish government which she represents, Plácido’s deeper concern in writing the poem.

Mas ¡oh ventura! Cristina llega  
Velado el rostro de magestad,  
Cual aparece radiante estrella  
Tras noche de horrenda tempestad.  
Cúbrese el campo de alegres flores  
Al divo aspecto de deidad,  
Y desde Gades, hasta Pirene  
Resuena el grito de Libertad (Valdés *Poesías Completas* 310 - 311)

In his analysis of “La ambarina” and Plácido’s other laudatory poems including “En los días del Sr. Antonio Buitrago. Gobernador de Matanzas” and

“Diadema régia ” Castellanos again acknowledges that Plácido does not praise Spain nor Spanish Colonial authority in these poems but instead is praising the new liberal politics that María Cristina and Isabel II represent. After analyzing this same stanza of “La Ambarina” in context with these other poems he comments that

En estos versos está contenida la clave de las poesías laudatorias de Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, el significado profundo de sus cantos a los monarcas y gobernadores hispanos. ¿A quién le canta Plácido? A María Cristina, la esposa de Fernando VII. ¿Y por qué no a Fernando VII? Sólo en una composición, muy de pasada e indirectamente alaba Plácido a Fernando VII<sup>36</sup>. Y lo hace en conexión con la jura de la princesa Doña Isabel, acto que Plácido (como muchos otros observadores españoles e hispanoamericanos) interpretaron como una victoria liberal. [. . .] Y se sugiere con bastante claridad que el elogio se dirige realmente no a las personas mencionadas, sino a la nueva política que ellas representan: lo que Plácido llama “nueva sol que Iberia nos ofrece.” (85)

Castellanos quotes here from the poem “Diadema régia” (Valdés *Poesías Completas* 653) and links it to the same ideas in “La ambarina” he solidifies this praise of change masked as praise of Spain as a common theme present in Plácido’s laudatory poems. True to this analysis we find that Plácido, much to the dismay of those who criticized him for being inconsistent, is in fact anything but

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<sup>36</sup> Castellanos refers here to the poem “Diadema régia” (Valdés, *Poesías Completas* 653).

that. As we see the same imagery, language, and ideology repeated frequently in these poems, we see the emergence of a sustained discourse that criticizes Spain and Spanish Colonial authority at the same time. For Plácido, it is clear that María Cristina's regency represents a clear new dawn in Spanish politics that in "Diadema régia", comes after "la negra tempestad" (653) and in "La Ambarina"; "tras noche de horrenda tempestad" (310) and signals a break from three hundred years of absolutism and monarchical reign. Now the cry of liberty can sound not only from Cádiz (*Gads*) to the Pyrenees (*Irene*), but can echo back across the Atlantic to Cuba as well on the same wind that carries the fragrance of the "célica flor" to María Cristina as the next stanza of "La Ambarina" so eloquently proclaims.

Traspasa el eco los anchos mares,  
La regia Antilla le oye sonar,  
Y le repiten alborozados  
San Juan, y Güines y el Almendar.  
La fama empuña su trompa de oro,  
Y por los aires se vé volar.  
Cual aura mansa desliza  
Sobre las olas del hondo mar. (311)

As this cry of liberty reaches the Antilles, it is grasped and repeated joyously by the waters of the "San Juan, Güines y el Almendar", three unique Cuban river systems that when mentioned here, just as in the first stanza, serve to give this

poem a unique Cuban specificity. The poem describes then that as the fame of this cry of liberty spreads itself gracefully over the island, it is precisely not Spain who will ultimately benefit from María Cristina's more progressive and liberal politics, but indeed Cuba. Again, just as in "Jicoténcal", he does not call for independence from Spain, but freedom from the oppressive form of government that has been in place since Cuba's very conception. María Cristina represents a new age whose hope far outshines the darkness of the Cuba's past. The image portrayed by her regency and government in this stanza is a more reasonable and gentler form of government ("cual aura mansa") than in the past. As her doctrines slide ("desliza") gently over the waters of the sea, they are a stark contrast to the more violent, deceptive and even "evil" form of government portrayed in the following stanza which can only be read as a direct indictment against Carlos María Isidrio (the brother of Fernando VII), the subsequent Carlist Wars and those elements of Spanish Colonial authority that still operated very much in the same way as in the days of the Inquisition and that would have undoubtedly been sustained in Cuba had Carlos assumed the throne upon the passing of his brother.

Quien lleva santos y esgrime espada

Acrecentando la rebelión,

Y cruel seduce los infelices

Bajo pretexto de religión;

Es una fiera voraz, inicua,

Maligno miembro de la Nación,  
Monstruo exsecrable [sic], que con mil vidas  
No paga el colmo de su traición. (311)

The repeated use of such strong negative words (“esgrime espada”, “acrecentando la rebellion”, “cruel”, “fiera voraz”, “inicua”, “maligno”, “monstruo”, “traición”) in the stanza create a dark and foreboding image of a government that “bajo pretexto de religión” seduces and controls its subjects would have in no way ever been allowed to pass the censors in Cuba if the entire poem wasn’t disguised as simple birthday poem in praise of María Cristina. This strong negative characterization of Carlismo and Spanish government contrasted against the “mansa aura” represented by María Cristina’s liberal thinking reveals how Plácido truly feels about the “status quo colonial” spoken of by Castellanos.

To punctuate this, in the next stanza Plácido again uses images of abject violence to refer to Spain and also makes an allusion to the Greek trilogy of tragedies written by Aeschylus commonly referred to as the *Oresteia*, to condemn absolutism and highlight the change that the regency of María Cristina embodies.

¡Sangre y venganza! ¡Sangre y venganza!  
Se alzó gritando la usurpación,  
Como el espectro que hablaba a Orestes  
Sobre la tumba de Agamemnon.  
“¿No queréis sangre? pues...tomad sangre.”



Dicen los héroes de la Nación,  
Y huye aterrada cual torva sombra  
Del negro Tártaro a la mansión (311)

The double cry of blood and vengeance raised by the forces of the “usurpación” or illegally claimed kingdom – a direct reference again to the attempted usurpation of Carlismo and all that it stood for, and an indirect reference to the Spanish conquest and Spanish Colonial authority – coupled here with the allusion to the *Oresteia*, solidifies the metaphor Plácido has so carefully established throughout the rest of the poem. As most scholars agree, the three tragedies comprising the *Oresteia* communicate several main themes but that principal among them is the theme of political change (Forbes 100). In particular, we see that the *Oresteia* illustrates the move in the Ancient Greek political and legal processes from a system built on blood-revenge to a public legal system based on the “Reign of Law” (Forbes 104), a critical element in the story of Orestes and Agamemnon (Forbes 104). There is no doubt that this is exactly what Plácido is referring to when he alludes to the *Oresteia* in this stanza. The cries of “sangre y venganza” represent the dead Agamemnon’s ultimate ironic fate. Though as king of Mycenae he often exacted blood revenge to administer justice, he soon found himself victim of his own ideology at the hands of his wife and her lover. Later on, his son Orestes returns to avenge his father’s death, kills his own mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, but is confronted by the ghastly Furies as he visits his dead father’s tomb. There they challenge his

notions of justice through vengeance and attempt to punish him for the murders but he soon escapes to Delphi where he takes refuge with Apollo. Apollo rules that he must bear one year of torment by the Furies then report to the goddess Athena at Athens who will shield him from the Furies. To do so, Athena convenes the Areopagus – a court comprised of Athenian citizens – who soon judge Orestes' fate. Their vote ends in a tie, which Athena herself breaks by siding with Orestes. The Furies protest the ruling, claiming that it is a subversion of the Ancient Greek laws and customs. Athena soon pacifies the Furies own desires for vengeance however through an offer of honorific status within the city's religion. This changes the Furies permanently as they are now called the Eumenides, or "the Gracious Ones" (Burkert 198) to symbolize their change from protectors of the blood-vengeance system to the bearers of a new system based on justice and equality (Haigh<sup>37</sup> 114-121).

In "La ambarina" Plácido describes the scene where Orestes is confronted by the Furies at his slain father's tomb to portray the situation present in Spain and Cuba. The Furies represent the then current Spanish Colonial authority and the previous three hundred years of Spanish government represented by "la Inquisición". Now, at the beginning of the regency of María Cristina, the old form of government ("sangre y venganza") is poised for a change to a more

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<sup>37</sup> The text cited here dates 1896 as I attempted to find a text that would most appropriate the same understanding of this text that Plácido would have had during his lifetime. From my research, it appears that this was the common understanding of the *Oresteia* throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and is also the most obvious reading of the text.

representative form of government that would bring the freedom that Plácido so ardently championed throughout his poetry and especially here in “La Ambarina.” Like the dark figure of the deity Tartarus fleeing to a fate worse than the underworld of Hades, Plácido places great hope in the new politics represented by María Cristina and relegates absolutism and colonialism to just such a fate as Tartarus. For him, María Cristina equates to freedom – freedom from tyranny, racism, and class oppression, but as his insistence on relying on María Cristina to bring this change through her office as Regent Queen of Spain demonstrates, is a freedom that does not necessarily mean independence from Spain.

Buscaglia-Salgado finds these same concerns present in Plácido’s famed and well investigated fable “El hombre y el canario”, one of the few poems in which he referred directly to and overtly condemned the practice of slavery. The caged bird in the fable represents the slave but that the master as Buscaglia-Salgado notes, is not necessarily the Spaniard, but the Cuban Creole – another metonym for the Spanish Colonial authority responsible for the oppression of the Cuban people. He then remarks that this is very different from the typical anti-slavery poems of the time and in fact represents

an unspeakable moment in the discourse of Cuban nationalism – Plácido placed the cause of freedom over that of independence, reclaiming the revolutionary possibilities we observed in the siege of Crête-à-Pierrot<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Buscaglia-Salgado refers here to the 1802 siege of the Crête-à-Pierrot fortress during the Haitian revolution. It was here that the forces led by Dessalines and L’Ouverture gained their first major advantages of the French army and when according to Buscaglia-Salgado, Dessalines first proposed that the

and elevating the practice to the level of discourse. (Buscaglia-Salgado 230)

In the same way that Buscaglia-Salgado recognizes in Plácido an anti-nationalist discourse of freedom over independence, Castellanos also identifies that in singing the praises of María Cristina and Isabel II in this way, Plácido's laudatory poetry represents a form of subversion. He recognizes the fact that Plácido knew that the Regent Queen had aligned herself with ideologies present in Spain at the time that in a modern context we would call "izquierda y centro-izquierda" (85) and that identifying this in these poems and especially in "La ambarina" provided an enticing argument that the mulatto poet could not resist.

Esto es lo que seduce al poeta. Esto y la oportunidad de vocear en su tierra esclava, bajo pretextos de elogios a la monarquía palabras por muchos consideradas subversivas, consignas casi revolucionarias.

(Castellanos 85)

The "almost revolutionary" and "subversive" terms to which Castellanos refers here are contained in the final stanza of the poem and though they appear to very dangerous terms for him to use, Plácido again disguises them as nationalist praise and elegy.

Hijos de Cuba, cuando yo me muera,

Con ambarinas me coronad:

Y si existiere la excelsa reina

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"the revolution against the plantation should result in independence" (217). For a more complete discussion, see pp.183-220 of *Undoing Empire*.

Hacedme el gusto de no llorar.

¡Viva la patria! ¡Viva el progreso!

Decid al punto de me enterrad,

Y yo os ofrezco de responderos

¡Vivan! y viva la Libertad. (311)

Reminding the reader that these words were written in Cuba, and not in the luxury of exile, as Heredia enjoyed, Castellanos comments that

Esto se proclama a los cuatro vientos en la boca misma del león  
hispanico, en la Cuba absolutista de los Tacón y los O'Donnell. El hecho  
de que se le disimularan un poco las artistas con el manto cristinista no le  
resta nada a su audacia. El poeta ha dejado claramente establecida su  
posición política: su patriotismo, su liberalismo. (86)

Though Castellanos' writing here lacks a certain sense of objectivity, his point is clear: Plácido's laudatory poems reveal a definite political tendency that instead of betraying his nation and his patriotism, in fact confirm it even more strongly. Just as we see in "Jicoténcal", with "La Ambarina" and his other laudatory and political poems including "Diadema régia", "A Doña Isabela Segunda en su día", "En los días de S.M. la Reina Gobernadora", and "En los días del Sr. Antonio Buitrago. Gobernador de Matanzas", Plácido has taken controversial and subversive subjects and disguises them, as subtly as possible, within topics and themes that are more benign and tame in order to pass the censors and criticize Spanish Colonial authority as harshly as he does and is not strictly limited to the

poems I have analyzed here but can be identified throughout much of his poetry. Though the format here does not permit the kind of detailed analysis as I have done with “Jicoténcal” and “La Ambarina” , poems such as “A Grecia”, “A Polonia”, “Muerte de Gesler”, “La sombra de Padilla” , “La siempreviva” and “Una lágrima de sangre” all artfully exhibit this same discourse and merit further critical scrutiny. Though they appear to address European themes and historical events, just as the rest of his poetry appears to broach a broad range of disparate subjects, they are always on some level referring directly back to Cuba. Relegated to the background in these poems are the image of the plantation and the economy it represents, and because its constant presence is always felt, it is an image that never fades. A solid understanding of these concepts and repeated themes in his poetry is the key to understanding Plácido’s poetic art, and was something that Plácido was very well aware of and would take with him even to the last moments of his life. In one of his more famous poems – part of his so-called “prison poems” – “Adiós a mi lira” Plácido admits this very fact. The poem, which carries the preface: “En la capilla. (Escrita pocos momentos antes de marchar al suplicio” (Valdés *Poesías Completas* 664), is Plácido’s last chance to confront his critics and remind the world of just what his poetry means and what his discourse communicated. True to his own appraisal of his consistent character he records:

No entre el polvo dela inmunda bartolina

Quede la lira que cantó inspirada

De laureles empíreos coronada  
Las glorias de Isabel y Cristina;  
La que brindó con gracia peregrina  
La “Siempreviva” al cisne de Granada  
No Yazga el polvo, no, quede colgada  
Del árbol Santo de la Cruz divina

Omnipotente Ser, Dios poderoso  
Admitidla, Señor, que si no ha sido  
El plectro celestial esclarecido  
Con que os enlaza un querubín glorioso  
*No es tampoco el laúd prostituido*  
*De un criminal perverso y sanguinoso.*  
*Vuestro fue su destello luminoso*  
*Vuestro será su postrimer sonido [ . . . ]*

Adiós, mi lira: a Dios encomendada  
Queda de hoy más: “adiós”. . . yo te bendigo  
Por ti serena el ánima inspirada  
Desprecia la crueldad de hado enemigo:  
Los hombres te verán consagrada.  
Dios y mu último adiós quedan contigo

Que entre Dios la tumba no se miente.

Adiós, voy a morir. . . ¡Soy inocente!. . . (664 – 666, emphasis mine)

Almost as though he could foresee the criticism his poetry would invariably bring, Plácido confirms to his readers that his poetry is much more subtle than it appears and cannot be taken for what it says on its face. Just as in his personal life – due to his ambiguous nature and racial status – Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés the individual was able to walk through and relate with all different facets of Cuban society; Plácido the poet is able to transform a plethora of themes, events and subjects into vehicles that carry his voice and his Creole-counter discourse not only throughout Cuba during his short lifetime, but likewise to the world, even well beyond the moment of his tragic death.

Because his access to the dominant white Creole antinationalist discourse is limited, Plácido's poetry creates its own separate interdictory discourse that is by its very nature more subtle, subversive and clandestine. In direct contrast to Heredia and the other writers of the Del Monte group and their more hegemonic white Creole discourse – many of whom are writing in the Diaspora and have the luxury of not being oppressed by Cuban censorship – and can directly criticize Cuba's colonial situation, Plácido is forced to be more clever and resourceful in his criticism, though it nevertheless does not lack the same vitriol and effectiveness as an instigating and “inflaming” force in Cuban letters. Ironically enough, another common theme which he uses to carry this discourse is his poems in praise of members of the white Creole hegemony itself, including Félix



Varela, Antonio Saco, José de Luz y Caballero, José de la Luz y Lugareño and of course José María de Heredia y Campuzano (Castellanos 89). The poems “La malva azul” and “El eco de la gruta” are dedicated specifically to Heredia and highlight the poet’s fascination with this group of writers that categorically excluded him. Writing about them alone could have proven dangerous enough to Plácido as they had all been practically named enemies of the state and the majority of them, like Heredia, were living in exile because of the rebellious words they had written and the rebellious ideologies they espoused. Audacious enough however, to say the least, Plácido – who by his own admission could never leave Cuba – identified that he could not be included within the ranks of their white Creole hegemony, but that he could and needed to approximate their hegemonic expectations even if he could not duplicate it discursively and was the only way his poetry could become the societal force and voice of change he desired it to be. According to Castellanos, this was his focus and purpose as a poet.

Tal vez pensaba el poeta que convirtiendo a su poesía en peligroso vehículo de sus ideales, reivindicaba ante el futuro su memoria dañada por tanta poesía de ocasión, a tanto la línea, como se ve obligado a escribir para ganarse la vida. El poeta alquilado creía sublimarse al devenir vocero de causas sacratísimas, pero perseguidas por el mundo oficial. Y si la disidencia podía hacerse pasar subrepticamente por aparentes elogios al gobierno, mucho mejor: doble victoria literaria, política y moral. (89)

As his experience as a Cuban colonial subject was very different from that of the members of the Del Monte group and was separated by the divisions of wealth, race and class in such a very conservative and stratified society, the liberal minded Plácido – who wrote poetry mainly “para ganarse la vida” – created poetry that mimicked and appeared very much like their dominant white Creole nationalist discourse, but was counter to it at the same time.

Just like Avellaneda and Manzano, Plácido wrote between the lines of hegemony and his poetry, because of its ability to speak so eloquently and sharply from a position of perceived racial and social inferiority, represents a slippage in the dominant discourse and presented its own brand of danger to the Spanish Colonial authority that ultimately cost the poet his life. As Buscaglia-Salgado records:

For the first time a mulatto poet had named his *mulataje* in all its complexity. It was the Creole’s turn to respond. [ . . . ] On the morning of 28 June 1844 [ . . . ] Plácido was shot to death by a firing squad in the San Carlos Cemetery in Matanzas. (234)

Though many other poets and scholars have attempted to write an appropriate enough epitaph for this venerable Cuban mulatto poet, perhaps it is best here to conclude by allowing Plácido himself to write his own. Always misunderstood and a direct contrast to Heredia – the symbol of the Creole society that rejected him – in arguably his most autobiographical work, “Consejos

a un poeta” Plácido provides this advice that in my opinion, best sums up his existence as a Cuban, a mulatto, and a poet:

Toma las cosas, poeta,  
Según el mundo pasan,  
Vamos al grano, y dejemos  
Heroísmos de la Iliada.

Dirás que el amor de aplausos  
Tus sentidos arrebató,  
Y que por corona  
Sin otro interés trabajas.

Convengo en que es noble idea  
La que al cielo te levanta;  
Mas verás que tiene  
También excepciones varias.

Si por ejemplo, celebras  
A una ninfa que otro ama,  
Y siendo una Mesalina  
Como a Lucrecia la ensalzas;

Si héroe llamas a un ladrón,  
Si Trajano, a una traga-aldabas,  
Si Tito a un prostituido,  
Y humano a un tigre de Hircania:

El pueblo que los conoce  
Y que rara vez se engaña,  
Pues sabe por experiencia  
Las cosas por el pasan.

Dirá que eres un vendido  
Que tu profesión degradas,  
Y como a falso profeta  
*Te dará con ello en cara*

Al que por hacer negocios  
Te pida versos sin tasa,  
Dale cien plazos; y nunca  
Sus pedidos satisfagas

Si es de aquellos majaderos  
Que hacen diez visitas diarias;

Cuéntenles en cada una  
Que tienes siete mil trampas

*Y necesitas dinero*  
Estas dos fieras palabras  
Son el “Agnus Dei” que ahuyentan  
Los demonios de la *guagua*.

Poeta, en las poesías  
Que del corazón te salgan,  
Busca imágenes aéreas,  
Pinta si quieres fantasmas

Con eso alcanzarás gloria  
Y será eterna tu fama;  
Mas cuanto a lo positivo,  
Visiones un lado aparta.  
Mira que hoy por varias vías  
Todos a un asunto marchan,  
Y sin reparar se ha dicho:  
*Que a vivir y buscar plata.*

Poeta, toma las cosas

Según el mundo pasan,

Vamos al grano, y dejemos

Heroísmos de la Iliada.

(Valdés *Poesías Completas* 206-207 – Emphasis Valdés)

## Chapter 4

### The Nineteenth Century Puerto Rican *Hacendado* Counter- Discourse of Eleuterio Derkes

*-“Negroes wrote too, and sometimes they wrote what would sell and sometimes they sought the truth; but they were always inhibited by the necessity of not offending whites.” - Lofton Mitchel*

*“Pero de estos autores se destaca una característica común - fueron pioneros, rompieron esquemas, se atrevieron. Fueron escritores puertorriqueños negros y mulatos que iniciaron una forma diferente de explicar el universo puertorriqueño en toda su complejidad social. Cada uno de ellos fue el iniciador de una singularidad literaria importante que consideramos presente y potente, principalmente en la dramaturgia, la poesía y el ensayo, que hoy no nos pasa por alto como lamentablemente pasó en su época.” - Roberto Ramos-Perea*

### Introduction – “(other) to the (other)”: Nineteenth Century Puerto Rican Hegemony and the Space of the Afro-Puerto Rican Writer

In his landmark 1952 book *Black Skin White Masks* Frantz Fanon redefined racism and the plight of the colonized people of color not only in the Caribbean but throughout the world as well. In his fifth chapter “The Fact of Blackness” he reasons that outside of a homogenous black society, black individuals learn to understand their blackness as an articulation of difference in relation to the white society that surrounds them. He explains:

As long as the black man is among his own he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. [. . .] For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. (109-110)

In a colonial context, the colonized black subject cannot know himself outside of the racist and classist structure of society. His blackness therefore is a construct of the racist white societal expectations, or as Fannon puts it, “a white man’s artifact” (14). In a very Lacanian<sup>39</sup> sense, the black subject and his subsequent discourse becomes an “other” to the hegemonic white subjectivity that he is forever trying to appropriate. Within this cultural structure white subjectivity, or white discourse, therefore seeks to erase blackness altogether, as Fannon explains in his fourth chapter “The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples”.

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<sup>39</sup> I refer here to Lacan’s seminal theories and analyses of Freud’s original concept of “The Oedipus Complex”, particularly his essay “The signification of the phallus”. See *Ecrits: A Selection* in the Works Cited.



In other words, the black man should no longer be confronted by the dilemma, *turn white or disappear*; but he should be able to take cognizance of a possibility of existence. In still other words, if society makes difficulties for him because of his color, if in his dreams I establish the expression of an unconscious desire to change color, my objective will not be that of dissuading him from it by advising him to “keep his place”; on the contrary, my objective, once his motivations have been brought into consciousness, will be to put him in a position to *choose* action (or passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict – that is the social structures. (100)

As white society and discourse attempt to subdue the black subject beneath its hegemony, the black “other” has no recourse but to either make himself be known (115) or shrink and disappear altogether (100). In his analysis of *Black Skins, White Masks* entitled “In/Visibility and Super/Vision: Fannon on Race, Veils, and Discourses of Resistance” David Theo Goldberg explains that this constitutes a process of veiling and un-veiling that results in a crisis of “invisibility” for the black subject that can only be resolved through over-determined self-identification with the hegemonic structures surrounding them.

Race extends visibility or invisibility to those it categorizes, and it may be used strategically to promote or deny recognition, social elevation and status. [. . .] The white world controls and dominates, though that domination and control are fragile and tenuous. [. . .] So black people are

faced with the dilemma that the principal mode of personal progress and self-elevation open to them is precisely through self-denial, through the effacement, the obliteration, of their blackness. They are predicated that is, upon the possibility of rendering a significant feature of their self-definition invisible, if not altogether effaced. This invisibility, in turn, is affected through the necessity of recognition by whites which is begrudgingly extended only at the cost of the invisibility of blackness. In other words, this [. . .] involves as its basis of a person as white. This cognition at once denies whiteness as it extends it, and effaces blackness as it claims to recognize it. (185, emphasis Goldberg)

Self-recognition in the face of a predominant racist and classist structure creates for the black subject a dilemma; he or she must either choose to succumb to the demands of hegemony and deny any racial and cultural heritage and identity, or become overtly visible to the point of risking denial of recognition based on racist premises. Goldberg goes on to explain that this unfortunate dilemma is the inherent product of all racist and classist based societies. In this chapter, my analysis demonstrates that this is especially manifested in the life and writing of Puerto Rico's first black writer (Ramos-Perea, *Literatura* 15) Eleuterio Derkes – whose writing has just recently been re-discovered and published for the first time since the nineteenth century by Puerto Rican playwright and literary critic Roberto Ramos-Perea. In his new critical anthology entitled *Literatura*

*puertorriqueña negra del siglo XIX escrita por negros* (2009)<sup>40</sup>, Ramos-Perea re-introduces to the world some of the forgotten texts of three important and influential Afro-Puerto Rican writers; Derkes, Manuel Alonzo Pizarro and José Ramos y Brans. In this anthology Ramos-Perea analyzes the lives and works of these three pioneering black writers and their struggles to overcome extreme prejudice and be recognized by the predominant white lettered society that surrounded them.

As a quick study of nineteenth century Puerto Rican literary history reveals, just as was the case in Cuba, the dominant discourse of the time was a discourse completely controlled by the white Creole and Spanish upper class lettered society. In one of the foundational and yet perhaps oversimplified attempts to define the role of literature in the establishment of Puerto Rican national identity José Luis González explains that

la literatura nacional fue fundada por señoritos (o, para decirlo en criollo, por 'blanquitos'). Solo que esos 'blanquitos' representaban en su momento, el sector más progresista de la sociedad puertorriqueña, el único que podía empezar a impugnar la dependencia colonial en el terreno de la cultura. Su rechazo de 'lo popular' expresaba en realidad su

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<sup>40</sup> Ramos-Perea is careful to point out that his anthology is in no means meant to contain all the works of these authors and recognizes that there still remain undiscovered many other important texts. In the preface he points out that the work bears the subtitle *Obras encontradas de Eleuterio Derkes, Manuel Alonzo Pizarro, y José Ramos y Brans*, with emphasis on the “encontradas” part and that the work consists of “el conjunto de 27 años de investigaciones en bibliotecas y archivos nacionales e internacionales. En este libro publico todo lo que hallé de ellos tres.” (i)

voluntad de hombrearse con los escritores españoles en el terreno de la literaria culta. (46)

While it is certain that the structural situation developing within Puerto Rican society during the nineteenth century is certainly much more complex than González allows here, it can easily be said that there existed a clear dichotomy between the Puerto Rican and Spanish intellectuals the forced the Puerto Rican Creole writers to appropriate the ideals and styles of the Spaniards in order for their texts to be accepted and pass the strict censorship that existed. In his autobiography Alejandro Tapia y Rivera explains that all Puerto Rican intellectualism was basically controlled by Spanish Colonial Authority. First, he notes that due to the lack of educational institutions on the island, many young Puerto Rican writers, including himself for a time, were destined to pursue careers in areas other than writing unless they could afford to travel to Spain to gain an education (*Mis memorias* 132, 141-142). Second, due to the strong colonial law established at the onset of the Conquest and which was reiterated in 1812 and again reinforced in 1825 commonly referred to as “las Omnímodas de la Conquista” (133), granted the Spanish *carte blanche* control over all the affairs on the island under the guise that it was enemy territory and did not fall under the same laws as mainland Spain (133). The result, he explains, was that these Governors arrived in Puerto Rico “no como simples oficiales generales sino como los antiguos virreyes” (135) who knew only one way to govern “o mejor dicho, no

gobernar sino mandar” (135). As such, he records that the Puerto Ricans had to be very careful about what they wrote.

Criticar o murmurar de las operaciones del Gobierno era la fórmula de acusación para recibir algunas pelucas y amenazas. Estas solían ser de prisión, de destierro, y no raras veces de fusilar. Frase esto de fusilar, que ha durado en boca de todos los mandarines coloniales [. . .], que con frecuencia las unía al insulto. (134)

As described by Tapia here, the political situation in Puerto Rico at the time closely resembled the political situation in Cuba that Avellaneda, Manzano and Plácido faced years earlier. Pressured still by latent fears of the Haitian Revolution of 1804, but more specifically by the more recent Creole independence movements in North and South America that had resulted in great losses to the Spanish empire, beginning in 1815 the Spanish colonial authority sought feverishly to maintain tight control on Puerto Rican soil through a series of changes to colonial law that would in effect “whiten” the island and would ultimately determine the direction of the dominant discourse being produced there.

In contrast however, to the situation in Cuba in which Domingo Del Monte and his group of Cuban intellectuals sought a cultural “whitening” through the abolition of slavery<sup>41</sup>, and as Paquette suggests – the emptying of Cuba of its black population altogether (Paquette 101) – Puerto Rican colonial authorities

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<sup>41</sup> For further discussion of the Del Monte group and their project to “whiten” Cuba see my analysis in Chapter 3 regarding Plácido and the implications of Robert Paquette’s work *Sugar is Made with Blood*.

sought to “whiten” Puerto Rico for more practical purposes. First, in order to capitalize economically on Haiti’s fall from prominence as the major sugar producer in the Caribbean and second, to maintain governmental control on the island, in 1815 the Spanish government secured this control by changing its immigration laws and affecting what Gonzáles refers to as the “blanqueamiento” (48) of Puerto Rican society. This radical new change came in the form of La Real Cédula de Gracias de 1815 which “sirvió para abrir las puertas de la Isla a todo extranjero blanco capaz de aportar capitales, conocimientos técnicos en la producción de azúcar, y esclavos” (Gonzáles 48). The purpose of the law was to bring to Puerto Rico an influx of Spanish professionals and other skilled workers in significant enough numbers not necessarily to tip the scales of population in Puerto Rico in favor of a quantitative Spanish and subsequently white majority – Puerto Rico was already one of the few Caribbean islands under Spanish colonial rule to actually have a greater population of whites than blacks (Gonzáles 49) – but of a qualitative one that would create a new white upper class that would serve to dominate the cultural and social landscape of the island and ultimately re-define and determine its hegemony. In essence, it is another reiteration of a plantation discourse, where the plantation is the center of economic production and all the societal and political changes are a direct result of this focus. In this case, the plantation discourse is determined by a practical need to bring more efficient means of sugar production to the island, which meant importing a different class of wealthy, educated and subsequently white

individuals from Spain, to the island. As Gonzáles states: “[d]e lo que se trataba, por lo tanto, era de un “blanqueamiento” cualitativo, vale decir una re-europeización de la élite blanca” (51). The results of this action were felt nearly immediately and were sustained throughout the nineteenth century resulting in the complete restructuring of Puerto Rican society, just as if another period of conquest and colonization had occurred (Gonzáles 52). Though many scholars have contested and redeveloped Gonzáles’ work on this facet of change in nineteenth century Puerto Rican society and in actuality is far more complex than the racially motivated reasons he expresses, for the purposes of this chapter his work serves to illustrate that this re-colonization, or as he puts it this “re-europeización” would not result in genocide and destruction, but would yield a different kind of cultural subjugation that would be felt most powerfully in Puerto Rican literature through the establishment of a developing discourse dominated by the Spanish majority that would force all writers and intellectuals, black and white alike, to conform to its expectations, or become lost and altogether forgotten. Though the image of the plantation would not be found in the forefront of this discourse nor would it figure as squarely as a central figure in its literature as it did in Cuba, the only reason the discourse existed as it did in Puerto Rico at the time, was to keep the plantation in the forefront of society. As a result, society would change and significantly impact the literary landscape which for the black writers of the day, and especially for Derkes, would in turn impact not only what they were able to write, but would ultimately dictate how they would have to

stylize their writing and means of artistic production, forcing them to create their own interdictory discourse that related their own unique experiences within this type of plantation society as only they could.

As these societal changes came about as a result of the pronouncement of the Real Cédula de Gracias de 1815, all Puerto Rican writers found it necessary to compare and fashion their writing after Spanish writers and it wasn't until the mid to late 1840's that Tapia, the most prolific of the native Puerto Rican writers of the nineteenth century, began to publish his works and influence the direction of the future of Puerto Rican literature. Unfortunately, this future as had been determined by the Spanish colonial control in every aspect of society, did not necessarily include blacks as literary agents due to the prevailing racist thought process which as Ramos-Perea expresses, was summed up by the popular refrain of the time: "El negro no escribe, solo sirve para trabajar la tierra" (5). Fueled by these types of racist attitudes, the climate in which Derkes found himself as a writer – barely favorable to Puerto Ricans, and much less hospitable towards blacks in general – of necessity dictated an appropriation of hegemonic ideals and styles of a discourse that in all reality was still in the process of being defined; a work in progress that only through twentieth century analyses and perspectives would eventually be better understood. Yet within the nineteenth century context of Derkes' life, determined the minimal conditions for his acceptance as an intellectual and as a writer.



In an earlier article written about Derkes and Pizarro, Ramos-Perea builds on the work of Latin American theatre critic Juan Villegas to identify and further define the hegemonic discourse of nineteenth century Puerto Rico that confronted Derkes and Pizarro. In his article Villegas examines Latin American theatrical discourse and concludes that there exist several different types of universal literary discourses and seeks to define and classify them. The first of these he labels “hegemónico” (Villegas 61) and defines it as such:

Corresponde a la práctica discursiva del poder cultural dominante dentro de una formación social. Generalmente se sustenta en el sistema de valores y los códigos culturales e ideológicos que corresponden al del grupo dominante, el que no es necesariamente el grupo político o económico dominante. (Villegas 61)

This simple and concise definition, though originally intended to be applied to the analysis of theatrical works, can be equally be applied to poetry and prose as well because of its universality. Building on this definition, Ramos-Perea argues that for the black writers of the latter half of the nineteenth century in Puerto Rico, the dominant functioning literary discourse was represented most notably by the works of Tapia.

Entrando inmediatamente en este esquema a la luz de los años 1865 a 1898, fechas de producción de la mayoría de los trabajos de Eleuterio Derkes Martinó (1835 [sic]-1883) y Alejandro Tapia y Rivera (1827-1882),

ubicamos a Tapia como el discurso hegemónico vigente. (“Discursos” 75-76)

The hegemonic discourse that confronted Derkes, Pizarro, Ramos y Brans and other late nineteenth century black writers, as defined here by Ramos-Perea was largely misunderstood by nineteenth century and some twentieth century critics. He explains that many of these critics saw it as a vision of “familiaridad” (*Literatura* 7) that attempted to paint a picture of a bucolic utopian society where all races were equal and co-existed harmoniously, which as he describes, especially in the life of Derkes, could not have been farther from the truth as the reality of late nineteenth century Puerto Rican society was very different from this ideal.

Hay visiones críticas – pocas – que aseguran que la convivencia del negro con el blanco antes de la esclavitud se dio en Puerto Rico de maneras pacíficas y hasta armoniosas, destacando “la familiaridad” que entre una y otra clase existía. Dicen estas visiones que la esclavitud estadounidense y su conocida crueldad no tenía jamás paralelo en Puerto Rico y que esta confusión lo que hace es distorsionar la “real” visión del entorno del negro en Puerto Rico. [. . .] Para poner en duda que tal “familiaridad” existiera entre intelectuales negros y blancos es suficiente el crudo testimonio de la misma vida de Derkes [. . .] era[ ] hijo[ ] de negros libres , cuya libertad no les fue otorgada con “familiaridad” sino en procesos de compra de libertad harto arduos y difíciles. (*Literatura* 7-8)

Though it is obvious that this picture of familiarity critically misrepresented the truth of late nineteenth century Puerto Rican society and culture and certainly did not exist on the level of literary discourse – the discourse that Ramos-Perea identifies most readily through the works of Tapia – did exist as a discourse of race and class based on the political leanings of the white Creole landowner or *hacendado* upper class of Puerto Rican society. Though this discourse was highly complex and continually being re-fashioned and redefined by social and political changes throughout the century, the effects of La Real Cédula de Gracias de 1815 began to be felt almost immediately and would be in full force in the median of Tapia's and Derkes' most productive years.

Often referred to by twentieth century critics as *la gran familia puertorriqueña* this discourse has been described by many different authors and in many different ways but is perhaps best summarized by Angel Quintero Rivera in his book *Conflictos de clase y política en Puerto Rico* (1976). Here Quintero Rivera explains:

La política puertorriqueña en el siglo XIX se caracterizó, pues por la lucha de los dueños de los medios de producción, los hacendados, por lograr un pleno dominio de clase frente a las fuerzas que se lo impedían: un poderío colonial frágil estructuralmente y los grupos sociales cuya posición en la organización social dependía de ese poderío, como dependía de ellos la débil metrópoli. Frente al decadente poder colonial, la ideología paternalista de los hacendados, sin embargo en lucha,

desarrolló el concepto, revolucionario en aquel momento, de la *gran familia puertorriqueña*. (24, emphasis Quintero Rivera)

Though the labeling of this discourse as *la gran familia puertorriqueña* was a twentieth century construct, the politics and social consequences that determined this discourse within the nineteenth century became manifest in the literature and criticism of the time period and served to control the intellectual efforts of both whites and blacks alike as Gonzáles and Quintero Rivera suggest. While Ramos-Perea doesn't specifically refer to what he defines as the hegemonic discourse at play in nineteenth century Puerto Rico as *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, the political and social circumstances he identifies as producing this discourse are one in the same.

Naming Tapia however, as the main progenitor of this discourse is somewhat problematic, though not entirely inaccurate. First, though he is associated with the white *hacendado* upper class, Tapia is not a land owner and was in fact rejected in some measure by this class. In fact, though he begins publishing his works in the late 1840's, it is not until he returns from a period of exile in Spain and he publishes *La Cuarterona* in 1867 that he is ultimately accepted in Puerto Rico and regarded as a serious writer and ultimately he does write "importantísimos trabajos que han sido catalogados como los pioneros en definir una dramaturgía nacional de altas preocupaciones sociales." (Ramos-Perea "Discursos" 76). On the heels of the success of *La Cuarterona*, he is able to establish the burgeoning Puerto Rican discourse that Ramos-Perea identifies

as “el discurso hegemónico vigente” (76). But, like all other writers in Puerto Rico at the time, in order to do so and to be successful Tapia had to insert himself within this Spanish *hacendado* driven hegemony and write according to its dictates in order for his voice to finally be heard, as Ramos-Perea describes.

El más importante trabajo de Tapia lo es *La Cuarterona* (1867), obra que recibe toda la influencia del drama bien hecho español. Hay en esta obra de Tapia importantes claves que lo definen como receptor y emisor de las influencias de su momento. Primero, que ni esta, ni ninguna obra escrita por Tapia, se desarrolla en Puerto Rico. Segundo; Tapia, al ser considerado como una de las primeras figuras de la literatura nacional, para ser aceptado como autor “español” tenía que cruzarse en los modelos de creación españoles, en los que se requería naturalmente, la pasividad o ausencia de su discurso regional. Tercero la adaptación de unos esquemas de valores en los que fácilmente se identificaba la supremacía blanca, la supremacía de castas y con ella todos los prejuicios de su época. (“Discursos” 76)

In order to eventually become a Puerto Rican writer, Tapia first had to become a Spanish writer and follow established Spanish creative methods. Consequently he had to be very careful in writing about his situation in Puerto Rico. In order to pass the censors and be accepted by the *hacendado* upper class, his works had to obscure themes and motifs that described the situation of his island homeland. Because of this the setting of his works often took place in Spain or other parts of

the world like *La Cuarterona* which is set in Cuba. In turn, following these same guidelines and writing first from the Spanish perspective would become especially critical for Derkes and other black writers, as otherwise, their works would have flatly been rejected. If Tapia, who was already white, had to first become Spanish before his works were accepted, then Derkes and other black writers first had to become white to gain immediate acceptance and recognition. Using Fannon's terminology, they either had to "turn white, or disappear" (100) – appropriate the Spanish styles and hegemony as Tapia did, thus making their writing appear as though they were white men writing about their own unique Puerto Rican experience, or be completely ignored and anonymous. Even so, while Derkes' works were published and he did eventually gain some limited recognition during his lifetime and his name is still remembered in Puerto Rico today (in Guayama there is still a street and a school that bear his name and in 1912 a group of benefactors attempted to erect a monument in his honor), unlike Tapia he may have ultimately suffered an even greater fate of anonymity; the loss and ignorance of his texts for nearly a century and a half. Indeed, overcoming the racial and cultural politics of his time would prove to be his greatest challenge.

In her analysis of Puerto Rican representations of Cuban *Bufo* theatre and its *negrito* figures in late nineteenth century theatre and early twentieth century television, Yeidi M. Rivero argues that the racialized blackface and blackvoice characters created by the Puerto Rican television and screen actor Ramón

Rivero represent a twentieth century reaffirmation of the “hegemonic whiteness” (317) established by the politics that created *la gran familia puertorriqueña* discourse. In her argument she references Lillian Guerra's theories on the construction of twentieth century national identity in Puerto Rico through the figure of the *jíbaro* – “the legendary central figure of Puerto Rican nationalism rooted in a Spanish colonial past” (3) or “the white Puerto Rican peasant most equated with Puerto Rican-ness” (4). According to Guerra, due to the nineteenth century hegemonic expectations, representations of the *jíbaro* were “constructed in such a way as to promote the legitimation of the elite Self as well as recognition of its reliance on the Other” (66). In this context, the *jíbaro* figure became the symbol of Puerto Rican nationality as it signified the intellectually independent Creole society (the Self) while recognizing the importance of the imported Spanish *hacendado* class and Spanish colonial authority (the Other) at the same time. Using this argument, Rivero then explains that this identification caused the representation of blacks, through the *Bufo* figure of the *negrito*, to take on a separate and still more inferior space due to the hegemonic expectations of the *gran familia* discourse. Although she is specifically analyzing the figure of the *negrito* in Puerto Rican theatre, its implications are universal and can be applied to all literary genres.

This racial and class construction of Puerto Rican-ness should be contextualized through the formation of the nineteenth century *la gran familia puertorriqueña* discourse. Although *la gran familia puertorriqueña*

embodied an anti-colonial ideology of ethnic solidarity against the Spanish colonial regime, it is also reflected in the paternalistic, class and racial (i.e. white) position of the Puerto Rican *hacendados* [. . .]. Thus, these intertwined racial, class and gendered ideological significations permeated the construction of the *negritos* in nineteenth century Puerto Rican theatre. Although Puerto Rican playwrights represented both black and white *jíbaros* as underclass, poor, and illiterate citizens, the *negritos* were located in a subordinate position to the white *jíbaro*. (320-321 emphasis Rivero)

In other words, black figures were always already marginalized as inferior colonial subjects to Creole colonial subjects who were in turn dependent and socially marginalized (other) by the Spanish colonial ruling class (Other). The cultural and political circumstances that lead to the creation of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* discourse, therefore relegated Tapia and other writes representative of the white *hacendado* class to an “almost but not quite” (Bhabha 86) *Spanish* status and black Puerto Ricans to their own individual, “almost but not *white*” (Bhabha 86) *Puerto Rican* status. In essence, black Puerto Ricans therefore become (other) to the (other), a mimicry of a mimicry; one more step removed from the centers of colonial power, and one more step closer to the altogether effacement of their racial identity. On the level of discourse, this then means that not only was the still developing *la gran familia puertorriqueña* discourse counter-colonial as Rivero remarks, but that it was also counter-



hegemonic to the controlling discourse originating from Spain that Tapia was forced to approximate. Black writers, relegated to a separate third place within this hegemonic paradigm, encountered both the Spanish hegemony, and the burgeoning *la gran familia puertorriqueña* discourse, as it would later come to be called in the twentieth century.

Bowing to these pressures, the early black writers in Puerto Rico suffered from the crisis of “visibility” of which Fannon speaks. In *Literatura puertorriqueña negra del siglo XIX escrita por negros* Ramos-Perea prefaces the re-discovered texts of Derkes, Pizarro and Ramos y Brans by offering an explanation for their apparent disappearance and public ignorance from the end of the nineteenth century to the virtual present and references Fannon in this context to describe the plight of black Puerto Rican writers of the time period.

A lo largo del siglo XIX la literatura puertorriqueña negra se mantuvo marginal y su proyecto ideológico tardó mucho en revelarse. Durante los años que van desde el primer estreno de Derkes (1872), hasta la fundación de la *Revista Obrera* (1893) por Ramón Morel Campos y José Ramos y Brans, mulatos ambos, ninguno de los autores decimonónicos negros alcanzó notoriedad o “visibilidad” - al decir de Fannon – o fama o reconocimiento por su trabajo. (3)

He goes on to explain that it is not the lack of production, nor necessarily the lack of literariness of their writings that caused their texts to become rejected and ultimately “lost”. They were texts written by black authors, and thus they did not

fit within the parameters dictated by the hegemony functioning in Puerto Rico at the time and were subsequently ignored.

Empecemos por apuntar, no “la ausencia de los textos” de las bibliotecas más importantes del país – como a manera de vergonzoso clisé se justifica el no conocer a un autor del siglo XIX –, pues los textos estaban allí, – en la misma Universidad de Puerto Rico muchos de ellos y en la Biblioteca de Ateneo los demás –; sino en absoluto desconocimiento del color del piel de sus autores por una parte, y por conocimiento, el evidente rechazo por esa misma causa. (3-4)

In direct contrast to Cuba where Juan Francisco Manzano and Plácido were relatively famous and celebrated for both their skin color and their status as writers, black Puerto Rican writers were virtually effaced of their blackness and/or not remembered as black or even writers at all. Through the consequences due to the establishment of La Real Cédula de Gracias de 1815 and the resulting classist situation, Puerto Rican colonial authorities were eventually able to accomplish for nearly a century and a half – even through the execution of Plácido – what Cuban colonial authority was not; the silencing of the black writer and the ultimate subjugation of an Afro-Puerto Rican society to a more dominant white *hacendado* ruling class. As Gonzáles states:

Decíamos que el “blanqueamiento” cualitativo de la sociedad puertorriqueña no alcanzó a consumarse con la primera oleada inmigratoria. Pero sí alcanzó, y eso fue lo decisivo, a posponer la

posibilidad de que en Puerto Rico cuajara una sociedad predominante afroantillana como las de las colonias inglesas y francesas. Frustró incluso la posibilidad de que en Puerto Rico se diera, como en Santo Domingo, una élite birracial en la que blancos y mulatos comparten los privilegios inherentes a toda clase dominante. (54)

Though Gonzáles' argument here is mostly based on demographics, it is important because it reflects the literary consequences and allows us to make several important conclusions about Puerto Rican society and draw comparisons between the "blanqueamiento" of Puerto Rico throughout the nineteenth century and the "whitening" of Cuba in the first half of that century. Unlike the Del Monte group's project of "whitening", which was ultimately unraveled in 1843 by the events that came as a consequence of the Escalera Conspiracy, the "blanqueamiento cualitativo" of Puerto Rico was nearly complete merely for the fact that the demographic structure on the island allowed for it. Although it did not carry the violence perpetrated against Plácido that *el proceso de la Escalera* did, such whitening in Derkes' case was almost nearly as effective. As a writer he was forced to satisfy the demands of both the Spanish hegemony that Tapia encountered and the *hacendado* class hegemony that Tapia was in the process of establishing. He had to make his writing appear as though he were part of the *hacendado* class, as Tapia had done – as though he were white (Ramos-Perea, *Literatura* 8-10) – so much to the point that many nineteenth and early twentieth century critics either did not recognize his racial ethnicity or later rejected him

altogether when they discerned it (4). Though his name and works are mentioned frequently in various bibliographies and almanacs, his published works were not widely circulated during his lifetime. If not for the career-long efforts of Ramos-Perea to search them out in libraries all over Latin America and Spain<sup>42</sup>, they would still remain largely unknown today.

Building on the pioneering endeavor of Ramos-Perea, my work in this chapter will further illustrate the life and works of Derkes not only as playwright but also as a poet and writer of prose as well. I will look at his works of poetry and drama and analyze the discourse communicated through his writing in contrast to the hegemonic pressures of the time. By comparing and contrasting his works with the texts of Tapia, I will show how he inserts himself into this white Creole *hacendado* discourse and how, as a black writer writing about black subjects and their unique Puerto Rican experiences, he creates his own discourse that functions counter to the controlling discourse in Puerto Rico. Specifically I will look at how his poetry and the dramas *Ernesto Lefevre o el triunfo del talento* (1871), *Don Nuño Tiburcio de Pereira* (1877), and *Tío Fele* (1883) communicate this discourse and provide a solid and true voice that still rings true today not solely for Afro-Puerto Ricans, but black writers the world over that would otherwise have been held silent and “effaced” of their blackness by being denied any cultural heritage or social relevance.

### **Summary of a Brief Literary Life; Eleuterio Derkes (1836 – 1883)**

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<sup>42</sup> See footnote 2.

José Eleuterio Derkes Martinó was born the free son of former slaves in September 1836 in Guayama, Puerto Rico. Though he did not have to directly bear the burden of slavery as his parents did, he was destined to a lifetime of humble circumstances, because of his race and social class. While very little is known about the actual circumstances surrounding his early life, we do know he that was educated primarily by Rafael de Castro, a poet in his own right, who would immerse the young Eleuterio in the study of languages – French in particular – as well as literature and various scientific subjects (Ramos-Perea, *Literatura* 18). Undoubtedly so, a part of his early literary studies with Castro must have contained a heavy poetic component as we see evidence that Derkes was indeed busy developing his craft at an early age and began writing sonnets, romances and other more complex poems as early as 1862 and began publishing them in various Puerto Rican newspapers and literary reviews such as *El Progreso* in San Juan, *La razón* in Mayagüez and the *Almanaque Aguinaldo para la Isla de Puerto Rico* as early as 1867<sup>43</sup>. His first book of poems, simply titled *Poesías* which more than anything was a compilation of his various poetic works up to that time rather than a concerted effort to produce an inherent book of poetry, was published in 1873. In fact, Derkes' early years – those prior to

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<sup>43</sup> Though Ramos-Perea asserts that “el poema más antiguo de Derkes” (*Literatura* 9) is entitled “El día de año nuevo” and first appeared in the *Almanaque Aguinaldo para la Isla de Puerto Rico* in 1867 (201), the untitled poem that carries the epigraph “A mi estimado amigo Candelario Sánchez en la muerte de su esposa, La Señora Sara María León, acaecida en el pueblo de Arroyo el 8 de noviembre de 1862” (182) suggests he was poetically active much earlier than this. Along with the date of 1862, the phrasing “en la muerte” and the familiar language of the poem leads us to believe that the poem was written to help assuage the anguish felt by his friend soon after - and possibly even in the very day of - his wife's death. This poem however was not published until 1871 in *Poesías*. Also Derkes himself notes in the dedication of *Poesías* that his poems are “flores que he recogido en el campo de mi juventud” (*Literatura* 158), indicating that he certainly began writing at a very early age.

1874 – would definitely prove to be his most productive in terms of numbers of works produced. In addition to *Poesías*, Derkes also produced two theatrical works, *Ernesto Lefevre* and its lost, unedited, and un-produced second part *La Nieta del Proscrito*<sup>44</sup>; several newspaper articles and essays including *La Religion* (1871), and the lost and unedited *Guía de las mujeres*; as well as two other unedited and lost novels entitled *Magdalena* and *El huérfano de Borinquen*<sup>45</sup>. In addition in 1874 he served as director and editor of *El Martillo*, a short-lived liberal reformist second newspaper in Guayama (Ramos-Perea *Literatura* 17). Despite this amount of literary production however, “[l]as ventas de la obra publicada no favorecían a Derkes” (Ramos-Perea *Literatura* 22) and he would have to engage in a variety of other offices to earn a living for himself and his small family.

For his profession, Derkes chose to follow the example of his mentor Castro and in his early twenties fulfilled the requirements to become a teacher. In fact, following in the footsteps of Tapia’s teacher Rafael Cordero, he would

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<sup>44</sup> Ramos-Perea has discovered only two original periodical references for this work, both from 1871 in *El progreso*, a liberal San Juan newspaper that served as the voice of the Partido Reformista and espoused many of the ideas of the hegemonic *hacendado* class, one of which lists the title as *La niña del proscrito*. He explains that the first of these two references lists this work as “en prensa” (Ramos-Perea *Literatura* 128) but comments that this doesn’t necessarily mean it actually ever was. He doubts Derkes was able to publish it due to the high cost of publication and adds that neither is it likely that it ever was produced by a theatrical company despite notation by Emilio Pasarell that it was produced at the same time as *Ernesto Lefevre* (Pasarell 308). To date, no copy of the work has ever been found and has officially been classified as lost by the Archivo Nacional de Teatro y Cine del Ateneo Puertorriqueño (hereafter referred to only as ANTCA) since 1987 (Ramos-Perea *Literatura* 21-22).

<sup>45</sup> While no exact dates are known for these three works, they are however mentioned briefly in the “Gacetillas” section of the newspaper *El Progreso* dated May 21, 1872, which allows us to categorize them as being written in his earliest phase of production - prior to 1874. While there is no remaining description of the novels, the essay *Guía de las mujeres* is described in this mention in *El Progreso* as “conversaciones familiares y novelas para instrucción y recreo del bello sexo” (Ramos-Perea *Literatura* 227).

become known as one of the first black educators on the island – one of only three at the time (7) – and would even open up his own school in 1868 (16), an act that brought him lasting fame in Puerto Rico as until very recently, he has been remembered on the island more as an educator than as a writer (Ramos-Perea 30).

Derkes' school was opened to students of all social classes but he made his living primarily by teaching the children of the privileged *hacendado* class of Guayama (Ramos-Perea *Literatura* 16, 25), though the rate of pay he received from these families was not equivalent to the same amount a white teacher of the same time period could charge, causing his income to be described as meager at best. Also, as he allowed the children of the artisan working classes attend his school, they would often do so for free, and even offered free classes to their parents at night. (16)

Comenzará a enseñar a los hijos de los obreros y los artesanos en la misma escuela que enseñaba a los hijos de los terratenientes. Pero a los primeros no les cobraba y lo que cobraba a los segundos – casi siempre dejado a la discreción de sus padres [. . .] era lo único que tenía para vivir, contrario a los maestros blancos o españoles cuyas tarifas eran indiscutibles. (9)

Despite these socioeconomic injustices and other social inequities, Derkes was able to make just enough money to take care of his family and keep his school up and running. Eventually, through his ardor, he was able to

purchase “cuatro cuerdas de terreno a la salida de la población y [. . .] humilde casita, toda cubierta de enredaderas silvestres” (Palés 237)<sup>46</sup> – no small feat for the son of former slaves, however temporary it would ultimately prove to be.

It is important to note here the importance of the social space of Guayama as an emerging center of Puerto Rican artistic production that while providential for the island, its future black writers, Puerto Rican culture in general, and Derkes himself for a time, would wield drastically ironic consequences for him both as a teacher and writer. With the construction of the Teatro Provisional de Guayama in 1845, the small sugar village located on the plains of Puerto Rico’s Southern Coastal Valley began to be infused with a new intellectual culture, primarily consisting of theatrical arts.

La construcción de del (t)eatro [. . .], la llegada de cerca de seis compañías dramáticas y de zarzuela entre las décadas de 1850 y 1870, la formación de primitivos grupos de perceptible valoración de la cultura de Guamaní, darían aliento a varios guayameses para iniciarse en la creación dramática, no solo en el campo de la actuación [. . .] sino en el campo más importante, más creativo y sobre todo más peligroso del teatro y la literatura: la dramaturgia. Curiosamente, serán los guayameses los primeros intelectuales negros en iniciarse en ese arte no sólo como

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<sup>46</sup> I quote here from the text of Vicente Palés who gives a very detailed and concise yet impassioned biography of Derkes in the “Frontispicio” of the commemorative book *Antología Puertorriqueña para el monumento Derkes* (1912) (See Works Cited) which ironically, does not contain any of Derkes’ works. Though original volumes of this *Antología Puertorriqueña* still exist, for convenience and to enhance his study of Derkes, Ramos-Perea reprinted the article as part of his anthology (*Literatura* 235-241). All quotes from Palés therefore bear the pagination of Ramos-Perea’s *Literatura*.



primicia guayanesa, sino como el primer pionero paso hacia la toma de una conciencia de su identidad negra, de su clase y de su nación. (Ramos-Perea, *Literatura* 15)

One of the few areas in Puerto Rico whose population was predominantly black, the addition of the theatre fostered a unique environment from which Derkes and some of Puerto Rico's most important and prolific black writers and artists would be engendered. Among the most famous names of the artists springing from Guayama in the mid-nineteenth century are playwright Manuel Alonzo Pizarro, poet Eleuterio Lugo, poet and actor Federico Matos, his wife and actress Isabel Tudela (Ramos-Perea *Literatura* 15) and of course, the poet Luís Palés Matos and his family whose members included mother Consuelo Matos Vicil – a poet, father and brothers Vicente Palés Anes, Vicente and Gustavo – all poet laureates respectively, and sisters Josefa and Consuela – both poets as well.

This insurgence of intellectual production in Guayama fostered cultural change in Puerto Rico that is still being felt today, but for Derkes, unfortunately it brought negative consequences as well. Following the paranoia of the celebrated yet failed 1868 “El Grito de Lares”<sup>47</sup> revolt and still fueled by the fears all Spanish colonial governments held stemming from the revolutionary movements on the New World continents, reports began to surface about the intellectual

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<sup>47</sup> For a detailed historical and critical analysis of the events surrounding El Grito de Lares I refer you to the book *Puerto Rico's Revolt for Independence: El Grito de Lares* (1985) by Olga Jiménez de Wagenheim. There she analyzes the details and events leading from the first conspiratorial whisperings to the consequences of the revolt's defeat. While I provide a brief explanation of this key event in nineteenth century Puerto Rican history, Derkes was in no way involved in the revolt and as such, a more in depth analysis is not warranted for my purposes in this chapter, though as illustrated here, he definitely was directly affected by its consequences.

achievements stemming from Guayama and specifically the progress Derkes was making with his school, and made their way to Lieutenant General Don José Laureano Sanz y Possé, in his second stint as governor of Puerto Rico. Quick to crack down on any perceived threat, Derkes soon became a victim of Sanz's tyranny. Deciding in 1874 to investigate these reports in person, Sanz travelled to Guayama where he met with local leaders from the Junta de Instrucción, who were suspicious of Derkes, possibly for racial reasons, as Ramos-Perea postulates.

Sanz se dio cuenta de que el separatismo no estaba muerto. Su misión sería apretar la cuerda desde el gobierno, centralizar al máximo poder político e iniciar la guerra fría contra toda sombra de separatismo. [. . .] decide “españolizar la enseñanza”, suprimiendo los colegios privados y sustituyendo maestros por otros abiertamente afectos a la causa incondicional. [. . .] Entre miles delaciones fabricadas y las sospechas promovidas tras su visita a Guayama, se despertó la inquina contra obreros, artesanos, y pueblo en general. Los mismos incondicionales guayameses “caciques de localidad” dieron la voz de alarma a Sanz sobre los progresos de Derkes como maestro y mentor de los artesanos, sobre la conciencia impartida sobre el valor del trabajo y de la educación. Las sospechas de Derkes se fundaron en la pasión que puso en su trabajo. (Ramos-Perea, *Literatura* 23).

After seeing the progress that Derkes was making with the working classes in Guayama and listening to the murmurings and complaints of the local white *hacendado* class, Sanz saw Derkes and his school as a possible threat and ordered its immediate closure (Ramos-Perea, *Literatura* 23; “Discursos”<sup>81</sup>) – an act that would seemingly condemn Derkes and his family to abject poverty that they would not be able to escape even through his writing.

El cierre de la escuela fue un golpe mortal para Derkes, pues se le condenaba a morir de hambre. Pidiendo prestado a los amigos, con tres hijos y mujer que mantener, “la humilde casita<sup>48</sup>” [. . .] se convirtió en prisión. La murmuración, el rechazo, y el hambre le obligaron a mantenerse incógnito y en la miseria durante siete años. Pero el hambre no le impedía seguir escribiendo. (Ramos-Perea, *Literatura* 23)

Betrayed by the same families from the white *hacendado* class who entrusted him to teach their children at discounted and discriminatory rates, Derkes was forced to live on monies borrowed from friends and eventually had to leave Guayama altogether and settle again in Ponce. And though as Ramos-Perea points out, this did not entirely stop him from writing altogether, a few years would pass before he was able to publish anything else and he would never reach the same level of production he achieved prior to the closure of his school. In fact after publishing *Ernesto Lefevre* in 1872 and a few poems and newspaper articles in 1873, the only works he manages to publish afterwards are four

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<sup>48</sup> Ramos-Perea quotes here from Palés as well. See footnote 8.

sonnets in *El Buscapié* and *Don Nuño Tiburcio de Pereira* in 1877, some more poems are then included in an anthology entitled *Poetas puerto-riqueños* in 1879 and then nothing again until 1883, the year of his death, when he would publish arguably his most important works: the one act play *Tío Fele* – which has never been produced theatrically (Ramos-Perea *Literatura* 362); and the satirical poem – heavily critical of Sanz and his government – *La Macabiada*, which to date remains lost and unanalyzed (Ramos-Perea 26-27; 362).

In his brief forty-seven years Derkes produced four major theatrical works, two novels, dozens of poems, articles, and essays, financing all of the publishing entirely by himself. Because of the political and financial difficulties that occurred to him in 1874, we can divide his work and discourse as products of two different phases of his life; before and after this date, that reflect not only his economic and political circumstances but more importantly how he reacted to the racist and classist society that surrounded him and how he narrated his unique experience within the colonial plantation economic system that was Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century. This date also closely coincides with the abolition of slavery on the island in 1873 and marks a transition period in Puerto Rico from a plantation economy fueled by slave labor to a more capitalist and imperialist economy with heavily steeped social classes that replaced one brand of oppression for another. By closely studying Derkes' texts we can see the emergence and development of a sophisticated and sustained discourse expressed through poetry, drama and prose that narrates his experience in both

socioeconomic conditions, closely mirroring the hegemonic discourse of the white *hacendado* upper class while being counter to it at the same time. While there are many ways that Derkes' work can be analyzed, for the purposes of this chapter, I will first analyze his poetry and then take a more in-depth look at his most important contributions, that of his theatrical works.

### **Hegemonic Subjugation, Self-Sacrifice and Self-Clinging: Derkes' Poetry**

From the dedication of his first book of poetry simply titled *Poesías* in 1871 it is evident that Derkes certainly understood what Tapia had learned in 1867 with the publishing of *La Cuarterona*; that in order for his texts to be accepted, in his writing he had to blur the fact that he was Puerto Rican and more importantly, altogether hide the fact that he was black, or at least make it appear at a first glance that he were Spanish and white. He dedicates the book of poems to Doña Rosario Calimano y Martínez whom Ramos-Perea speculates to be “una empolvada damita de sociedad por quien Derkes sentía gran afecto” (*Literatura* 16) and reasons that she is most likely from the white *hacendado* upper class of Guayama as “en varias ocasiones, a través de esta investigación, veremos el nombre de Derkes junto al de las adineradas familias de la sociedad guayamesa” (16). Normally, the dedication of a book of poetry is relatively unimportant, but in this case it is very significant. First, as he dedicates the poetry to her, he is also dedicating it to the dominant white society surrounding him and importunes not only her favorable approbation, but that of the *hacendados* as well.

A La Señorita Doña Rosario Calimano y Martínez

Apreciable Señorita: la Amistad que os profeso me impulse a dedicaros estas flores que he recogido en el camino de mi juventud. Habéis visto ya algunas de ellas y las habéis juzgado favorablemente: os creo porque sois franca, sincera y tenéis sano criterio y natural buen gusto. Si esta guirnalda que os dedico, como digno homenaje rendido a vuestro mérito, obtiene vuestra aprobación y la del público, quedarán satisfechos los deseos de El Autor, E. Derkes. (Derkes 158)

Indicating that as his work has already been approved in times past by Srta. Calimano , Derkes invites not only the lady Calimano to read and approve of his works, but the public, or the white *hacendado* class to do so as well, and assures that his work will again measure up to the high standards set by both. With this type of an introduction he is saying that his work will fit within the parameters of the white world that surrounds him because he has followed the hegemonic leanings coming from Spain and that his work will be recognized and accepted by the white *hacendado* class. Or in other words, that no one will be able to tell the color of his skin by the appearance of his work.

Because he appropriates the *hacendado* discourse like Tapia did, his writing represents a mimetic process; he attempts to mimic the *hacendado* discourse, and like Tapia, who was one step removed from this discourse on a symbolic level, is always already removed from the center of power, or as in his unique case, always already twice removed. In this sense, Derkes' appeal for

approval also becomes a form of subjugation; not only does this serve as an effacement of his race, but it also makes him subject to the white world that surrounds him; subject to their approval through their hegemony. He does the same thing that Manzano did when he called himself a “medio poeta<sup>49</sup>” (Manzano 78); he recognizes his own subaltern position within the lettered world (Arroyo 65) that was late nineteenth century Puerto Rico. Just as Manzano labored as a slave to please his mistress and wrote for Del Monte to earn his manumission, Derkes writes first to seek the approval of the *hacendados* and as such subjugates himself to their *hacendado* hegemony. At the time of the publication of these poems, slavery is still very much in effect, but writing about its atrocities, and confronting the injustices of the colonial system head on was impossible without facing drastic consequences. Instead, he writes poetry that appears to appeal more to the sensibilities of the society surrounding him. Just as he makes concessions at his school and allows the families of the rich, white, *hacendado* class students dictate the prices they will pay for his services, he allows that same class to dictate the appearance of his poetry by bowing to the conventions of their controlling discourse.

Ramos-Perea analyzes both his acquiescence in his business dealings and his early poetry not only as an act of subjugation, but also as a powerful tool of “insertion” (*Literatura* 9) into the *hacendado* hegemony. He compares Derkes’ situation as an educator to that of his predecessor Rafael Cordero, who also

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<sup>49</sup>See Chapter 1 pg. 30 and Chapter 2 pg. 8.

allowed the white *hacendado* families to dictate the amount of tuition for his services and lived off their graces. In Cordero's case however, instead of being seen as an act of subjugation, this was read by the public as an act of Christian kindness and humility that transcended the stigma of his race. In his comparison of their situations, Ramos-Perea explains that for both Derkes and Cordero, because of the small numbers black intellectuals in the time period, religious instruction became the most viable avenue of intellectual expression, and for Derkes the only other option was through a poetics that mimicked the hegemonic discourse of the *hacendados*.

La otra salida de esa expresión será la poesía de ocasión, celebrativa e inocente. La poesía dedicada como cortés expresión de admiración y respecto a la señorita blanca, a la familia adinerada, al comerciante rico, al funcionario, en una suerte de adulación y acomodo propios de una "convivencia" que no ofendiera al blanco y a su poder. Esto no era ciertamente familiaridad o bondad sino *servilismo*. ¿No sería por razón parecida que el Maestro Cordero Molina no establecía precio a su enseñanza y se conformaba con lo que de buena mano le trajeran los padres de sus discípulos? Es indiscutible que si acusamos al Maestro Cordero de ser servil a una hegemonía, tampoco hay duda de que pesaban en él sentimientos profundamente cristianos, humildes y virtuosos que convierten a este Maestro en beato, en un ser fuera de lo común, que ganó espacio de reconocimiento y admiración por sus obras



humildes y cristianas, más que por su color. [. . .] ¿Era humildad en el caso de Derkes y Cordero? Creemos que era *temor de exigir lo justo*, porque el ser un maestro negro llevaba implícita la imposibilidad de exigir la justicia o igualdad de trato que los maestros blancos. Este temor ha sido confundido con “humildad”. En el caso del Maestro Cordero ese temor pudo haberse transformado en humilde sumisión cristiana propia de un ser profundamente espiritual; en el caso de Derkes, igual o más espiritual que su antecesor, creemos que fue estrategia de inserción, negociación pacífica a cambio de respeto y reconocimiento. (*Literatura* 8-9)

Trapped by the conventions of their time, Derkes and Cordero adopt an attitude towards society that goes well beyond humility and kindness and while Ramos-Perea is correct in the analysis that this attitude of servility does allow Derkes to insert himself into the hegemony of his time, it is much more than a peaceful negotiation in exchange for respect and recognition. On the symbolic level, as Derkes submits his will to the *hacendado* hegemony, Derkes allows himself to become a bondsman; a literary subject whose work (writing) can only be accepted as it appropriates and supplants his own desire for the desire of the master.

In her essay of Hegel's “The Unhappy Consciousness”, Judith Butler analyzes the mimetic nature of Hegel's master/slave dialectic and the need for the bondsman within this dialectic to work not only to please the lord but to

supplant his desire for the lord's thereby making his labor become an extension of the lord himself. She comments that

the bondsman understands two issues: first, that what he is embodied or signified in what he makes, and that what he makes is made under the compulsion to give it up. Hence, if the object defines him, reflects back what he is, is the signatory text by which he acquires a sense of who he is, and if those objects are relentlessly sacrificed, then he is a relentlessly self-sacrificing being. He can recognize his own signature only as what is constantly being erased, as a persistent site of vanishing. [. . .] Not only does he labor for another who takes the yield of his labor, be he gives up the signature for the signature of the other, no longer marking ownership of his own labor in any way. (40)

In Derkes' case, as he dedicates his poetry to Doña Rosario Calimano y Martínez and the *hacendado* public and states that his desire is their approval ("Si esta guirnalda obtiene vuestra aprobación y la del público, quedarán satisfechos los deseos de el Autor") he enters the level of the symbolic and in doing so gives up his signature and autonomy for the signature and autonomy of the *hacendado* discourse. This analysis would seemingly erase any individuality from his work, but as Ramos-Perea points out it was a necessary strategy of acceptance, a way of making his poetry viable within the context of the times in which he lived.

Esta primera fase de la literatura negra vivirá en un entorno agresivo, donde el intelectual negro, directo testigo de las atrocidades de la esclavitud en Puerto Rico, tendrá que hacer una astuta selección de palabras y acciones que no le asocien, en primer lugar a la cimarronería rebelde que ya había causado problemas graves a los terratenientes, y en segundo lugar, que no representara una imagen perturbadora a la paz de la inteligencia blanca que pudiese interpretarse como arrogancia o “parejería” o a una intromisión en un espacio creador al que el negro no tenía derecho. [. . .] Para entrar en el mundo blanco sin ofenderle, lo propio sería hablar en su idioma. Es por esta razón que los primeros escritos por un negro en Puerto Rico serán poemas de amor en la más sencilla y hasta simpática formalidad romántica. La dedicatoria de estos versos, siguiendo la tradición de los poetas románticos españoles y puertorriqueños establecidos (Vidarte, Gautier, Padilla, Sama, Tapia y los demás) será a damiselas adolescentes, señoras de sociedad que no desperdiciaban elogios, o señores del mundo comercial y político cuya “estatura social” no se afectara por el elogio de un negro. (*Literatura* 9)

As Derkes' early writing closely mirrors the same romantic and simple (“sencilla”) poetry being produced by the more accepted poets of the day, according to Butler's analysis of Hegel, this makes Derkes' efforts an exercise in self-sacrifice. This does not however mean that he ultimately loses his own voice. As she points out further along in her argument, in fact this self-sacrificing is a both a

rejection and recognition of the self. The closer the bondsman comes to ultimately losing all autonomy (facing his own death) through his subjugation, the more he recognizes that parts of his discourse that are inherently his own, which constitutes what Butler calls “a stubborn attachment” to his body of work.

The bondsman verges on this shattering recognition of his own death [. . .] but he recoils from recognizing death, attaching himself instead to various attributes of his own, taking up a posture of smugness or stubbornness, clinging to what appears to be firm about himself, firmly clinging to himself, in order not to know that death threatens every aspect of his own firmness: “since the entire contents of its natural consciousness have not been jeopardized, [. . .] determinate being still *in principle* attaches to it; having a mind of one’s own is self-will, a freedom still enmeshed in servitude”. (41-42)

Even though he voluntarily subjugates himself to the hegemonic expectations of the *hacendado* discourse and his poetry appears to be a copy of the poetry of Vidarte, Gautier, Padilla, Sama and Tapia a closer reading of his poems reveals that they are not in fact an exact copy, but quite to the contrary, express a unique voice and contain themes that the other white writers wouldn’t be able to relate in quite the same way. It is in these instances where his poetry is not an exact copy; where he relates things that only he can, in the ways that only he can – the instances where he “clings to himself” – that his voice is truly heard. These are the instances then that give him great power as a poet. In the same sense that

Manzano's poor grammar and the punctuation errors of his *Autobiografía* bear his indelible mark and calling himself a "medio poeta" establishes his own authorial agency and provides a voice for his unique experience as a Caribbean subject, so does Derkes' poetry as it provides him an avenue to comment on aspects of Puerto Rican life that are unique to his situation and bear the marks of his economic situation and ultimately his color. He cannot attack the social injustices he sees all around him head on, but he does not hesitate to illustrate the miserable conditions caused by those injustices.

From the very first poem in his book entitled "Las musas", which appears to be the fourth canto of a larger work entitled "Espíritu del cristianismo", Derkes's poetry is filled with a sense of fatalism and despair that the neoclassic and romantic style of his poetry only tends to heighten and is not as readily found in the poetry of other poets like Tapia and Sama. "Las musas" is an allegoric and autobiographic poem that narrates the conversation that a young poet named Luciano has with his older, wiser mentor. As Luciano is about to embark on a career as a poet he counsels with the old man about his choice and as he approaches him Derkes describes the scene and pays particular attention to the description of the old man.

Fija la vista, el ademán sereno,  
sobre un sitial vetusto recostado;  
las rugosas mejillas, muellemente  
en las enjutas manos apoyando,

sumergido en profundas reflexiones

reposa triste un venerable anciano. (Derkes159)

Seemingly, this picture of a sad (“triste”), old man (“anciano”) with his wrinkled cheeks (“rugosas mejillas”) resting on his dry hands (“enjutas manos”) would describe any older gentleman, but he is a stark contrast to the young, vibrant Luciano “Un joven que contara veinte abriles, / moreno de ojos negros, rostro pálido” (159) a fact which becomes all the more apparent as the reader learns how the old man came to be in this condition at the end of the first stanza. After asking the young Luciano if he really wants to pursue the life of a poet he informs him of its rigors, he uses himself as the ultimate example of just how difficult it will be for him.

“Oh joven confiado é inexperto  
que en tu febril ardor y anhelo cándido  
la inexorable rueda de fortuna  
juzgas tener en las robustas manos! [ . . . ]

Hijo del corazón, mira la nieve  
que ya blanquea mis cabellos lacios;  
estudia en esta faz triste y marchita  
las severas señales que han grabado  
el tiempo con su rápida carrera  
y con látigo atroz el desengaño. (159)

While most of the rest of the poem reads like a neoclassic instruction manual on how to write a neoclassic poem, this first stanza serves as a warning to the young black poet who can be read as Derkes himself. According to the linguist Edwin Figueroa Berríos, who in 1999 became the first critic outside the nineteenth century to analyze any of Derkes' works in detail (Ramos-Perea *Literatura* 16), there is no doubt that this is a purely autobiographical reference.

No hay duda que “el joven moreno, de ojos oscuros”, de la alegoría no es otro que el propio Derkes quien aspira a pertenecer a la élite de hombres ilustrados adscritos a la corriente del neoclasicismo en la literatura y a los postulados ideológicos de la Ilustración. (Figueroa 237)

The warning made by the wise mentor combined with the image of the old man, weathered by the storms of life, especially by those he faced because of his choice to be a poet, serves as an ominous portent for any poet, but becomes particularly important as it is made to the vibrant and young black poet who stands as a stark contrast to white and alabaster world of the classic age the poem describes. This powerful image brings the topic of race and the social inequalities between classes to the forefront of the poem without making it the central theme. It is carefully couched within the instructions and warnings that come as counsel given to the young poet preparing to embark on this career. Further along in the poem this image is again solidified with another warning that comes as part of the instructions on how Luciano's poetry should be formed and

most importantly what he should write about, making the following three stanzas the most important in the poem:

De la región excelsa de lo noble,  
hasta lo más vulgar y más villano,  
caprichoso el destino a los mortales  
va en distintos lugares colocando,  
y en este espacio desigual, inmenso,  
hay grados mil que ocupan los humanos.

Todo es variado allí, todo es distinto,  
desde la pobre choza del esclavo  
que baja humilde la abatida frente  
ante el mirar ceñudo de su amo,  
hasta el vate tranquilo, placentero,  
que *ni envidoso vive, ni envidado*,  
y ageno de ambición su lira pulsa  
en la elevada cumbre del Parnaso.

En medio de los males y tropiezos  
de que sin duda te verás rodeado,  
hallarás almas de elevado temple  
que te prodigarán justos aplausos:  
almas de sentimientos puros, nobles  
que con su placer cultivarán tu trato,



y ensalzarán tu inspiración ardiente

si digno fueres de ceñir el lauro (Derkes 161)

As the instruction continues and the old man counsels the young Luciano to write about everything from “lo noble” to “lo más vulgar y más villano”, Derkes artfully places the image of the poet (“el vate”) along with that of the slave (“el esclavo”) making a direct comparison between the two, though it appears to be a contrast. In the first of these three stanzas, Derkes juxtaposes the images of “lo noble” with that of “lo vulgar” and illustrates how destiny (“destino”) places humans within an immense unequal space in thousands of different stations. The image of the slave and poet would then seem to be disparate and on opposite ends of the spectrum the wise old sage mentions. The rest of the poem comments on the nobility needed to be a poet and would seem to elevate this image, but coupled with the dramatic description of the old man giving the advice and the prophetic nature of the warnings he gives, we know that for Luciano, being a black poet will be anything but noble. Taking into context the autobiographical nature of the allegory, it is clear that Derkes places the office of the slave and the office of the poet on equal terms. To be clear, he solidifies this comparison by using the old phrase “*que ni envidioso vive, ni envidiado*” – which was often used to describe the humble attitude of the “good slave” – to describe the attitude of the poet. Just as the slave must bow his head before his master’s gaze (“esclavo que baja la abatida humilde frente ante el mirar ceñudo de su amo”), so too must the poet live his life in subjugation without ambition (“ageno de ambición”). Indeed, in this

poem the poet and the slave are one in the same and therefore, the struggles the poet faces, which the old man warns about, become a description of the life and struggles of the slave. The counsel he gives to the autobiographical Luciano in the last of these stanzas is clear; to be worthy to wear the noble laurel of the poet, he (Derkes) must write about the lives and noble souls not only of the white upper classes, but of the blacks and the slaves and all the lower, less socially mobile classes as well.

Placing this poem at the beginning of his book and coupling it with the dedication to Doña Rosario Calimano y Martínez, Derkes creates a poetic discourse that in every aspect appears to mimic the poetry of those poets of the late nineteenth century who were more closely associated with the hegemonic processes at work in Puerto Rico during that time period. He appears to voluntarily subjugate himself to this hegemony, risking his own poetic life as it were, but immediately clings to those things which are uniquely his; the experience of a black intellectual in the face of terribly oppressive economic, racial and social injustices. He does not shy away from writing about topics and themes that were he to do so overtly, would spell his demise as an artist. Instead he very subtly and very carefully crafts a work that confronts these issues while not calling attention to them at the same time and they become much more than the simple (sencilla) “flores que he recogido en el camino de mi juventud”. His discourse flows along the lines of hegemony but in its ambivalence – the parts that can only be communicated by someone in his unique social position –

directly confronts that predominant discourse creating a slippage in the discourse that functions counter to it at the same time narrating a unique Puerto Rican experience that could not otherwise be communicated in the same way.

Throughout the rest of his poetry this discourse also prevails. Many of his poems narrate this same feeling of desperation and the struggles between race and class, particularly his sonnets, which in addition to being published in *Poesías*, many were published in various other publications including the literary themed periodicals *El Martillo* and *El Buscapié*. Using the classical style and form of the sonnet, he is able to introduce these themes and narrate the conditions of life that he faced throughout his life in a brief, concise, yet very powerful format that was already accepted by his *hacendado* readers. In total, there are thirty-one sonnets that were included in *Poesías* and to date, another four have been located and are grouped in Ramos-Perea's anthology under the subtitle *Poesías sueltas*. While all of these deserve further critical attention and scrutiny, there are several that most readily develop these themes of oppression and struggle. In his linguistic essay on Derkes' poetry, Edwin Figueroa analyzes Derkes use of language and pays particular attention to his poems that use a mixture of Spanish and French, Spanish and English (in fact he names Périco, the subject of Derkes' poem "el primer nuyorican de nuestra literatura" (246) for his alternate use of English and Spanish in Soneto XXVI as he describes his travels between New York and Puerto Rico), or Spanish and the Africanized Puerto Rican *bozal* dialect. First, he analyzes Soneto XXV, a poem that features a perfectly metered

and rimed mixture of French and Spanish that tells the brief story of an unrequited romance that as indicated by the mixture of the languages, is due to a distinct difference in classes between the poetic voice and the object of his affection Doña Venancia.

Los juegos bilingües no son los únicos en los que Derkes compuso sus sonetos festivos; también demuestra su habilidad creadora con la lengua campesina, la que conoce lo suficientemente bien como para exhibir con ella su destreza de versificador acomodándola al rigor métrico del soneto. Sus piezas no se detienen en lo meramente pintoresco sino que funden con la gracia de la expresión la esencia de lo tradicional. [. . .] La conjunción de estos elementos proyectan y sintetizan la relación de sana convivencia y solidaridad de nuestro campesino comunicadas con su pintoresco sentido del humor que deriva en parte de la inserción en el soneto de nuestro refranero popular. (242)

For Figueroa, this bilingualism is important in Derkes' work because it accomplishes both the tasks of demonstrating his creativity and communicating his discourse. Derkes uses both languages to establish his own intelligence while at the same time he is able to continue to illustrate the social differences present in Puerto Rico at the time and is particularly present in his sonnets. Arguably the most important of Derkes' bilingual sonnets is Soneto XXIX subtitled "Lamentos de un gíbaro" and is laced with both the bozal dialect of the "jíbaro" figure and the challenges of his difficult life.

Cuando su cara el Sol ai mundo asoma,  
ya un cuairo y maj e medio ha chapodeao;  
y zis! zas! meto mano a mi talao  
jasta que llevo a la empinpáa loma.

Too mi ativiáa lo vence y doma;  
pero cuando ya ei fruto he cosechao,  
como la cena de aquel rey mentao  
puce que caldo y espina solo coma.

Si trabajo alquila.... paa lo mesmo:  
con *órdenes* que dan que no jué ei trato  
encaje dey tender pago ei diezmo.

Así vive sin cota y sin zapato  
este pobre Juan Peiro Nicodejmo  
sin que puea sacal los pies dei plato. (194)

The injustices expressed in this lament are heightened by the mixture of the bozal with the Spanish. In the mouth of jíbaro himself – a figure which as Guerra and Rivero explain is most often identified as the white peasant-farmer (Guerra 4, Rivero 317), but because of his use of the *bozal* mixed with Spanish is in this case most certainly black – the lament becomes much more authentic and plausible. According to Figueroa, therein lies the strength of Derkes' poetry, and it is especially manifest in this sonnet.

La nota humorística que con gran acierto maneja nuestro poeta desaparece ante un tema que aflora tanto en sus poemas breves como en los extensos: la condena de la injusticia. Derkes se siente solidario con el hombre oprimido, no importa la circunstancia. Se indigna tanto ante la tiranía del poder económico como el político, sufridas ambas en carne propia. El lado amargo de la vida del campesino aparece en el soneto XXIX orquestrado como un lamento , aunque no deja de ser una protesta social del poeta ante el engaño, la explotación y el oportunismo que se enseñan sobre el hombre del campo, condenándolo a una vida sin esperanzas de redención. (243)

Clearly Figueroa sees in Derke's poetry a sustained attempt to condemn all forms of oppression and injustice whether they be social, racial or economic. By combining both these social themes with the use of the *bozal* dialect mixed with the Spanish, Figueroa identifies that Derkes is able to relate to the "jíbaro" at the same time as he makes his poetry acceptable to the *hacendados* through the use of the sonnet.

John Lipski also analyzes the use of the bozal in Derkes' short play *Tío Fele*. Though he does not analyze Derkes' poetry and truthfully barely mentions *Tío Fele* – dedicating only a short paragraph to its analysis – Lipski's analysis of Derkes' use of the *bozal* is very important in the discussion of Derke's sonnets here as it illustrates how Derkes is able to relate to both the *jíbaro* and the *hacendado* at the same time.

Another source of Afro-Puerto Rican language is [. . .] *Tío Fele* [. . .]. There are several scenes in which *bozal* fragments occur; these do not suggest a systematic Creole, but rather the imperfect learning of Spanish. These extremely brief fragments do little in the way of reconstructing *bozal* language in colonial Puerto Rico, but they do indicate some awareness of Africanized Spanish during the nineteenth century. (179)

Combining this “imperfect Spanish” within the format of highly stylized and regulated classical sonnet is a powerful mode for Derkes’ discourse to travel. He is able to communicate to the *hacendado* class, not only in a format they understand and accept, but in language that is familiar to him and all Afro-Puerto Ricans alike and that is really the only way their situation in society can truly be communicated. Just like the errors in Manzano’s “imperfect Spanish” found in the manuscript of his *Autobiografía* represent the very scars on his body as Cintio Vitier suggests (Schulman 29), combining the *bozal* with Spanish to communicate the themes of struggle and oppression that Derkes narrates in his poetry is a way for Derkes to literally give a poetic voice to the Afro-Puerto Rican subjects of the exclusive and racist *hacendado* hegemony on its very own terms. This makes the final three of Derkes sonnets in *Poesías* arguably the most important of them all specifically because the poetic voice is definitely black as indicated by the Africanized *bozal* fragments that Derkes employs.

Though the rest of his sonnets do not use the *bozal* dialect as the last three that appear in *Poesías* do, they are not any less important and continue to

effectively communicate Derkes' discourse. The first, and perhaps most subtle that we come across in Poesía is Soneto III subtitled "A una niña". Here, Derkes appears to celebrate the life and youth of a young girl, but the celebration is filled with dread for the changes the future will certainly bring.

Niña que con sonrisa seductora  
por el alba caminas de la vida,  
con calma goza de la edad florida  
que su sendero su inocencia dora.

Deslízase tu vida encantadora,  
Juguetona, graciosa, divertida,  
cual agua cristalina, que impelida  
va por la brisa plácida, sonora.

¡Lástima que con pasos presurosos  
el tiempo avanza con igual constancia  
y cambiará tus juegos deliciosos!....

Mas goza, Teresita, en tu ignorancia,  
no acibaren mis juicios sentenciosos  
las horas inocentes de tu infancia. (190)

Though she is only in her youth, the poetic voice can see the difficult road of life that lies ahead of the young Teresita and though in the last stanza he apologizes for attempting to steal her youth away from her by his "juicios sentenciosos", it is in fact too late as his words of fate, already pronounced, cannot be taken back



and he can't deny the course of her future nor does he attempt to paint a bright picture of things to come. For Teresita, the outlook is bleak and the most the poetic voice can do is to apologize and allow her to enjoy "las horas inocentes de tu infancia" while they last, because surely they are coming to end.

Other sonnets that express this same kind of fatalism include Soneto IX, subtitled "La esperanza" in which Derkes questions the purpose of hope altogether in the final stanza:

Espera el hombre, acaba su confianza;  
vuelve a esperar y a su ilusión se entrega:  
duda, teme, la mira en lontananza....  
¿Cuándo el ansiado término se llega?  
¿Es molesto fantasma la esperanza,  
o es vano sueño que con uno juega? (191)

Here, hope is an illusion that plays with humanity. It cannot be trusted and only desperation is sure. In the very next sonnet, Soneto X, subtitled, "La rosa marchita" the very title itself expresses despair and a state of constant decay. Again the last lines express the sentiment more profoundly: "Cuando ví que del tiempo los rigores / sus lindas hojas marchitado había .... / ¡Todo pasa en el mundo cual las flores!" (191). Once again life is set on a course of decay and misery that man cannot avoid, no matter what he tries. Other sonnets that express these same sentiments include Soneto XXI "Sic transit gloria huius mundi", Soneto XXIII "Lamentos de un marido, and Soneto XXIV "A la miseria".

Not to be excluded in this discussion either are his longer poems which communicate this same discourse. Among them are the poems “Ella o ninguna”, “Gemidos de un octogenario”, “Cuadro del hambre”, and the powerful and more obviously titled “El dinero”. While each of these sonnets and poems deserve to be analyzed individually and constitute a rich literary treasury that is just now being re-discovered, together as a whole they illustrate a sustained attempt to communicate Derkes’ own unique discourse of misery, pain and injustice inflicted on him and all Afro-Puerto Ricans alike due to the social and economic injustices of late nineteenth century colonial Puerto Rican society. While not all of his sonnets and other poems paint the same bleak and stark picture expressed by this part of Derkes’ discourse – there are plenty that express its antithesis; a picture of love, joy, hope and even a sense of humor as Figueroa points out – the poems analyzed and mentioned here strike at the heart of Derkes’ economic and social reality as an Afro-Puerto Rican in the late nineteenth century. Though not all was as dark as these poems would lead us to believe, the frequency and repetition of these themes do show that for Derkes, it was definitely a major concern, and something that he felt he needed to illustrate in order to be worthy “de ceñir el lauro” of the noble and honest poet, a theme that will continue to be repeated in the most important of his literary contributions – his drama.

### **A Playwright Ahead of His Time – The Theatrical Works of Eleuterio Derkes**

From the time of his ninth year in 1845, Derkes found himself surrounded by a burgeoning theatrical culture that blossomed with the establishment of

Guayama's Teatro Provisional. It did not take long after the completion of the theatre for Guayama to transform into a center for cultural and artistic production. Experiencing this transformation during his formative years Derkes began to flourish as a writer and it is easy to see how, within the context of this process of cultural enrichment present in Guayama with its specific emphasis on theatre, the talented young writer would begin to develop the art of dramaturgy. Though he would only end up publishing three theatrical works, *Ernesto Lefevre o el triunfo del talento* in 1871, *Don Nuño Tiburcio de Pereira* in 1877, and *Tío Fele* in 1883, for a period of roughly thirteen years his artistic production was dedicated almost entirely to his dramas as he found in them a more effective way of delivering his discourse and allowed him to further illustrate the social injustices and inequalities of Puerto Rican society. As mentioned previously, Derkes' body of works can be divided into two separate time periods, before the closure of his school in 1874 and after. This division, while evident in his poetry as well, is most visible in his dramas as the first two, *Ernesto Levefre* and *Don Nuño Tiburcio*, like his poetry are more subtle and show a more overt attempt to closely appropriate the more dominant Spanish romantic theatre in style, form and substance. This is where Derkes however is able to demonstrate his great talent as a writer, showing with these works he is able to both meet the expectations of the *hacendado* discourse and stand against the social injustices occurring in Puerto Rico at the time.

His first and longest drama, *Ernesto Lefevre o el triunfo del talento* is a five act play that narrates the classic struggle of a love triangle wrapped around a class conflict that ultimately has great political and allegorical implications. Though the setting of the play is Paris in early 1815 – shortly before Napoleon Bonaparte's return from his exile in Elba – the political backdrop and the plot lines perfectly describe Derkes' Puerto Rico in 1870, making the autobiographical implications numerous.

The main character and protagonist of the play is Ernesto Lefevre a young, journalist and playwright from Marseille who, after heroically saving her life by stopping her runaway carriage, falls in love with the young and beautiful Amalia, the daughter of the politician José Laborde. Amalia, a very strong and opinionated female protagonist, falls in love with Ernesto too but is also the love interest of the older Marqués de Rochefort, whom Laborde would prefer his daughter to marry. After Ernesto writes some very critical articles about the Marqués in his newspaper "El Investigador", the two also become political rivals and sworn enemies. As their rivalry intensifies, the love between Ernesto and Amalia continues to blossom and it appears that the young writer Ernesto has gained the moral high ground over his opponent the Marqués. All appears to be going in the favor of the young couple when Ernesto's step-father Alejandro enters the scene and reveals that fourteen years previously Amalia's father, José Laborde, had desecrated Alejandro's sister's honor and caused his father's death. As the scene unfolds, Amalia sees that her father is now contrite and begs

Alejandro and Ernesto to forgive him. Seething with vengeance however, Alejandro refuses and pulls his stepson into his quest to bring Laborde to justice. Ernesto, now seriously conflicted between his loyalty to his stepfather and his love for Amalia, follows Alejandro and leaves Laborde's house undecided about his course of action, but promises to return to her. In his absence, Laborde convinces Amalia to marry the only man who can now deliver him from his crimes, the Marqués de Rochefort, who is only too willing to comply in order to best his younger rival both socially and politically. Amalia reluctantly consents in order to help protect her father and show her own loyalty. Ernesto finally returns and tries to convince Amalia to elope with him to the United States but her own sense of honor won't allow her to do and she refuses. Determined however to help her father resolve the conflict between him and Alejandro and rescue her relationship with Ernesto, Amalia reaches out to the dishonored sister of Alejandro, Dolores and convinces her to marry her father. Alejandro however refuses this possible resolution and won't allow Ernesto to convince him to forgive Laborde. Distraught and without any hope that Alejandro will forgive Laborde of his crimes, Ernesto determines to leave France and return to the United States to live out his days with his native servant Dagoa. Seeing the desperation in his stepson however and his determination to leave, Alejandro relents and forgives Laborde, presenting him with the incriminating documents so they can be destroyed. Upon seeing the documents, Amalia's aunt Teresa realizes that she has seen them before and asks Alejandro how he received

them. He tells her they came from an anonymous source in Marseille and she reveals that they are the same documents she saw in the house of the Marqués two years prior. Upon hearing this, Laborde realizes that the Marqués has very carefully orchestrated the whole nefarious affair and announces it just as the Marqués enters the room. In the city outside, Paris is celebrating the return of Napoleon and as the action in the play reaches its emotional climax in a most ironic twist. Alejandro, who is seeing the Marqués for the first time, recognizes him and reveals that he is Ernesto's real father and that after deceiving and seducing his mother, abandoned her after she burned the franc bills the Marqués offered her as a payoff. In the final scene, as Napoleon continues to approach, all the secrets of the Marqués are completely revealed. As he realizes his whole world is falling down – socially, politically and financially – the Marqués dramatically commits suicide, ending the play with Ernesto accepting the death of his real father with a touch of lament and Alejandro reminding him that while the Marqués may have been the father of his body, his true father was the one who gave him the education and morals that made him the good man that he is.

While the play is an obvious morality tale, it does more than merely pit good against evil. While Derkes uses the characters of Ernesto and the Marqués to illustrate this classic confrontation and somewhat represent opposite poles of French society, they also, and more pointedly so, represent the extremes of Puerto Rican society in the late nineteenth century. Ernesto is described as “un joven modesto, fino, algo trigueño, de fisonomía simpático” (Derkes 105) who

after his mother's death at only ten years old "tuvo que sufrir los rigores de la hambre y la miseria; mas soportando con valor y heroísmo los rudos golpes de la adversidad, logró formarse por sí mismo, después de continuas dificultades y prolongadas luchas" (105). This physical description hints of a mixed racial heritage ("trigueño") and combined with his extreme poverty and his subsequent rise from it through the practice of writing – particularly through journalism and playwriting, make Ernesto a very autobiographical character (Ramos-Perea 21; Figueroa 257), giving the play a uniquely Caribbean, and specifically Puerto Rican feel. In the same way that Plácido uses poems about María Cristina and Isabel II to disguise his commentary on Cuba and that Manzano speaks about his experience as a slave through the autobiographical Zafira, Derkes uses Ernesto Lefevre to narrate the social and economic inequalities of Puerto Rico. Juxtaposed against him is the figure of the Marqués, who, in his own words, represents "las antiguas familias de la Nación" (108) and "las columnas de estado" (108) – the *hacendado* class and despotic Spanish colonial authority of Puerto Rico that had oppressed Derkes since his infancy. For the Marqués, Ernesto represents exactly the opposite, a new, rising generation enriched with talent and education that through their endeavor and the honesty of their character, will eventually overthrow the wealthier upper social class who by virtue of their birth only have come to inherit the social positions they occupy. It is also clear that this is not just a social revolution to which Derkes refers, but political as

well. In the words of the Marqués, Derkes describes the exact dangers this new society represents for the *hacendado* class.

[E]sa aristocracia de nuevo cuño intenta invadirlo todo, hace inútiles tentativas para eclipsar a las antiguas familias de nuestra gran Nación. Unos cuantos intrusos, charlatanes, soñadores, que hacen mucho ruido entre la multitud ignorante, se presentan como los regeneradores de nuestra Patria, hacen una oposición sistemática al Gobierno, y con audacia inaudita quieren nivelarse con los que desde remotos siglos vienen siendo las columnas del Estado.... El Mundo está perdido! La sociedad se hunde! (108)

For the Marqués, Ernesto represents a new breed of intellectualism that through more liberal and reformist ideas, that would forever change his world as he knew it politically socially and economically. As Ramos-Perea confirms, the history that Derkes narrates with *Ernesto Lefevre*, while analogous to the history of France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, conforms more to the actual situation that Derkes was living in Puerto Rico at the time – making the Marqués' words that much more prophetic and poignant.

1870 era un año difícil para Puerto Rico, pues los reformistas buscaban nuestra participación con derechos y deberes de la provincia. Las luchas internas de los partidos para escoger delegados a la Diputación Provincial, la lucha contra los representantes incondicionales, con amplios poderes y ventajas en muchos de los pueblos no impidieron que el



reformismo lograra sus triunfos. Los reformistas representaban entonces “esa aristocracia de nuevo cuño” en contra de los incondicionales españoles, o “columnas del estado”. [. . .] A Derkes, como militante reformista, no le convenía atacar a ese gobierno, pero no sintió temor alguno de tronar contra la intolerancia incondicional, representada en la figura del Marqués, e incluso intuir el bastardo nacimiento de la intelectualidad del nuevo cuño, como un modelo-víctima de los desmanes de las buenas familias de la nación, cobijadas por gobiernos despóticos.

(*Literatura* 21)

Through the retrospective lenses of these historical and literary analyses it is obvious that Derkes indeed continued to infuse his work with his counter-*hacendado* discourse. This was however very carefully disguised by the masterful touch with which Derkes is able to combine the elements of drama, plot and conflict in the play. As Ramos-Perea comments, Derkes is able to combine these elements and cry out against his oppression while presenting a character with a serious and plausible moral conflict.

Derkes es un dramaturgo astuto, pues supo en esta escena climática – fin del Acto Tercero – trenzar la cuerda con todos los elementos (complicaciones y obstáculos), y las situaciones dramáticas de la estructura central desarrollados hasta el momento. El conflicto que se produce es esclarecedoramente verosímil y genialmente elaborado, pues ha puesto a confligir ideológicamente, con gran éxito, a los dos

protagonistas del drama, y no con el antagonista como podría esperarse del drama típicamente romántico español de la época. (*Literatura* 20)

Rich in many different interpretations and opened again for a multitude of future analyses, with *Ernesto Lefevre* Derkes was able to successfully produce a play that was acceptable not only to the standards of the *hacendado* hegemony but was also acceptable to him as a medium for his discourse. Just as he did with his poetry, by mimicking the romantic styles of drama coming from Spain and the *hacendado* discourse, Derkes is able to carefully navigate the delicate waters of literary political criticism that existed in the late nineteenth century Puerto Rico and produce a play that denounces Spanish colonial authority and the oppression of the social and economic disparities of the class structure of his society.

If with *Ernesto Lefevre* Derkes was able to reach across the hegemonic lines and appeal to the *hacendado* class by writing about Puerto Rico under the guise of a play set in Paris, then to write directly about Puerto Rico he would have to follow a similar tact, and that is exactly what he does with his next play; *Don Nuño Tiburcio de Pereira*. While this play was not published until after the closure of his school in 1874, it was written sometime before 1872<sup>50</sup> with all the

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<sup>50</sup> Ramos-Perea asserts that this work was written and takes place in 1877, but the “Gacetillas” notice he places in the book from the newspaper *El Progreso* dated May 21, 1872 lists it as one of Derkes’ prior literary accomplishments as a “pieza cómica en verso” (128). Given the short length of the play and the fact that it is written in verse, it would be doubtful to assume that it was not entirely written at the time of this notice. Ramos-Perea argues that one of the possible motivating factors behind Derkes’ reasoning for writing this play in 1877 as he assumes, was to show the direness of his circumstances after the closing of his school (25). This small contradiction in dates does not negate this argument however, but could be one of the very reasons that Derkes chose to publish it when he did. Indeed, the work, as Ramos-Perea declares,

intentions of publishing and producing it in the theatre during that time period. This one-act comedy in verse is set in Mayagüez but the hero of the play turns out to be Don Nuño Tiburcio de Pereira, a native of Spain who moved to Puerto Rico at the age of six. He is invariably then, a member of the white *hacendado* class but is possessed with many of the same set of virtues as Ernesto Lefevre and in the end, proves Derkes' point that morality and talent are more important and enduring than wealth and position.

The plot of the play is relatively simple, Doña Venancia, the mother of the female protagonist Pepita, desires for her daughter to marry the much older Don Nuño in order for her family to progress socially and economically. Don Nuño also desires to marry Pepita but is more realistic about the union and in the end when he sees that Pepita is in love with the younger Domingo, whom he recognizes as the son of a man who helped him in his own time of need, not only allows them to marry, but blesses their union and offers them his protection against Doña Venancia who is opposed. Again, on its most basic level, the play is another morality tale plotting greed and social mobility against love and moral honesty. However, a deeper reading of the text suggests that Derkes is again appealing to the sensibilities of the *hacendado* class while criticizing Puerto Rican society at the same time.

While Don Nuño is a member of the *hacendado* class, he proves to be very different from those who have been at the forefront of the oppression that

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is one of Derkes' finest and that upon writing it Derkes "está en su mejor momento como dramaturgo", but at the age of 35 or 36 and not 41 as Ramos-Perea states.

has marked Derkes' life. First, though he is from Spain, he has lived in Puerto Rico since the age of six and since he doesn't know Spain, proclaims he might as well be from there anyway. Second, though he is rich, he has worked hard to obtain his fortune and by his vocabulary and heavy Puerto Rican accent that as Lipski points out, like the *bozal* indicates an improper education of Spanish, we learn he is more closely related to the working class and breaks the *hacendado* stereotype presented by the characters Mendoza (Pepita's uncle) and Doña Venancia who suppose him to be motivated solely by money. After joking with Pepita that the day before he saw him rolling around in money and seemingly bathing himself with it; "[c]ojía un puñado de onzas / y con ellas se estrujaba / cuello y cara" (130), Mendoza describes Don Nuño as

[. . .] hombre de historia.

Franco, leal, avariento.

que un centavo no perdona,

que presta al cuatro por ciento,

y al cuatro por ciento cobra:

miserable, estrafalario,

insipiente de alma fofa,

que enteramente carece

de educación... (131)

Later, after Pepita asks her mother why she wants her to marry Don Nuño, Doña Venancia describes him as "hombre de capital / tiene casas, rica estancia" (131)

and plants the idea to her doubting daughter that money is more important than character and education by proclaiming “él que tiene... tiene ciencia” (131). With these first descriptions of Don Nuño, we are lead to believe that he has very little strength of character and lacks not only education but moral fortitude. As a member and metonymic representative of the *hacendado* class, this stereotyping reveals how the lower Puerto Rican Creole classes regard the *hacendados*. As his character develops however, this stereotype shatters and first image of Don Nuño changes rapidly.

As the central conflict in the play centers around the desire for and greed of money, through this struggle Don Nuño proves to be benevolent with his money and shows strong moral character. After telling Doña Venancia that he will not marry Pepita because she loves Domingo and not him he explains to her that he is not what she believes him to be.

¿Piensas tan inhumana  
el alma de Don Nuño es?  
Yo compro carne de res,  
pero nunca carne humana.  
¿Qué sacaré con llevar  
a mi casa una mujer,  
que no se quiere casar?  
[. . .]  
Pues mira que yo discurro

como el primero del mundo  
y soy un hombre fecundo,  
aunque me crees un burro. (136)

As he turns the stereotype around on Doña Venancia, he stands as a stark contrast to her greed and avarice, and that which she had mistakenly attributed to him. Not only does this change the perception of Don Nuño but most of the assumptions of the play as well. The false idea that Derkes attacks here, which is equally expressed in *Ernesto Lefevre* by Laborde that “[e]l dinero es el rey del mundo” (109) and by Domingo in *Don Nuño* that “triunfa el dinero” (131), is once again proven false. Though it would seem therefore that this would be very ironic of Derkes to prove this idea false by venerating the *hacendado* class through the figure of Don Nuño, he is in fact using this role-reversal as a harsh criticism. Most of the traits exhibited by Don Nuño are the same exhibited by Ernesto Lefevre and if we look at the ideas expressed in both works, they are indeed one in the same; a sustained discourse that is prevalent and constant.

In his own words to Domingo in the final scene, spelled purposefully by Derkes to emphasize and mark the heavy Puerto Rican accent and like the *bozal* used in *Tío Fele*; to demonstrate his “imperfect learning of Spanish”, Don Nuño summarizes all the same principles represented and espoused by Ernesto Lefevre, and situates himself apart from the rest of the *hacendado* class.

Te probaré que escondió  
aquí se halla un corazón

más grande que un tiburón,  
pero leal y agradeció.

[. . .]

A nadie mal he causao  
ni he metío en duro lance;  
mas defiando a todo trance  
lo que el sudor me ha costao.

[. . .]

El mal que me desconsuela  
no comprendes, que juiciosa  
supo tu madre afanosa  
mandarte, amigo, a la escuela.

Si hijos tuvieres, prudente

Dale, Sóla, educación:

No le dejes ni un doblón,

Pero hazlos gente...hazlos gente (137)

With this denouncement of money and the plea for Domingo to educate his children, Don Nuño reverses the stereotype first attributed to him and becomes its exact opposite. Instead of being a metonymic representation of the *hacendado* class, he is its antithesis and one of its harshest criticisms. The fact that that stereotype even exists in the work in the first place, reveals that Derkes is using the figure of Don Nuño as a witness against the “columnas de estado”

instead of lauding them for having positive qualities as would be supposed. If Derkes had to disguise his social commentaries about Puerto Rico behind the backdrop of Paris in *Ernesto Lefevre*, what better way to talk overtly about Puerto Rico and its social inequalities than to disguise them by making the hero of the play a member of the society in Puerto Rico he wishes to criticize most? The theme of social and economic inequality is universal in both plays. Though the argument can be made that he definitely venerates Don Nuño as “el rico honrado” (Ramos-Perea *Literatura* 23-25), and by proxy the *hacendado* class at the same time, the play is a strong criticism of the structures of power and prevailing attitudes that created these inequalities in the first place.

By making Don Nuño the hero of the play and its subsequent morality tale, Derkes chooses not to vilify specific members of the *hacendado* class nor specifically the *hacendados* as a class itself – at the time of the writing (1872) he still depends on them for his income and the support of his school – but he does heavily criticize their very existence and the Spanish colonial system for creating them. Because of this the play is a safe passage for Derkes’ discourse and the discourse itself is indeed as powerful and subversive as Ramos-Perea speculates it could be.

No descarto entonces la posibilidad de que Derkes haya sido virulentamente vilipendiado por alguno de sus tantos enemigos por sus posiciones progresistas en contra de la excesiva acumulación de capital y la ausencia de talento en la clase dominante – lo que podía soñar



abiertamente subversivo, separatista y de incipiente tono socialista – y esto motivara que al escribir esta obra se subsanara la ligereza de la crítica que se le hacía, aclarando, en términos sencillos, que los ricos son unos iletrados, pero pueden ser buenas personas de las cuales valerse para el desarrollo del talento. (25)

By itself, *Don Nuño* doesn't seem to communicate the radicalism that Ramos-Perea suggests here, but when taken into account with the rest of his works, this clearly becomes a possible and viable reading of the text. As part of a greater *hacendado* counter discourse, the play takes on a greater meaning and is opened up to a wider range of critical evaluations. While more overtly about Puerto Rico than *Ernesto Lefevre*, *Don Nuño* is also more subtle and ironic in its discussion of Puerto Rican society. Though it appears to praise and venerate the *hacendado* class, the play actually contains some of his harshest criticisms against them. This dichotomy of criticism through subtlety would change however with the writing of Derkes' most racially motivated work, *Tío Fele*.

After the closure of his school in 1874, it became apparent to Derkes that he no longer had to write to first appease the *hacendado* class through a close adherence to hegemonic styles, ideals and language. He had already suffered greatly from the official oppression of the Spanish colonial authority and from the unofficial oppression of the *hacendado* class and his writing became more overt and pointedly critical. *Tío Fele* not only takes place in Puerto Rico but features black protagonists and racial themes that up to that point, Derkes had treated

almost as taboo, and had been forced to write about with great subtlety and at times subterfuge. Breaking from this mold, *Tío Fele* tells the story of the *jíbaro* Félix Vazquez Barrios, or “Tío Fele” as his name is pronounced in the Africanized cangá (Ramos-Perea, 27, Lipski 179). Again, the plot is relatively simple as and Ramos-Perea and Angelina Morfi have already provided ample plot summaries, only a brief description is necessary here.

Though not wealthy by birth, but rather through his industry, Tío Fele has come to acquire a number of properties and is involved in several profitable businesses. At the onset of the play he faces three important legal issues he desperately needs to resolve and attempts do so with the help of three different lawyers, who each represent a different facet of Puerto Rican society. Along with these legal issues, he is also confronted with a significant moral issue that once again, pits honesty of character and love against social position and mobility. His wife, Leonor, wants his daughter, Isabelita, to marry Miguel who because of the light coloration of his skin “passes” as white and comes from a substantially wealthy family<sup>51</sup>. These seem to be however Miguel’s only socially redeeming qualities as he is also described as lacking education and strength of character.

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<sup>51</sup> Though through the repetition of this theme of mothers desiring their daughters to marry for money it would seem, at least at a casual glance, that Derkes’ works might contain an anti-feminist sentiment. Quite to the contrary, Derkes was as Ramos-Perea states “un militante feminista como Tapia, y comprendía que su trabajo tenía el imperativo moral de dedicar gran parte de sus propósitos civilizadores a la educación de la mujer”. This is especially evident through the character Amalia in *Ernesto Lefevre*, who never wavers in her morality nor her honesty. He also dedicates many poems and several newspaper articles to feminist causes and womanhood in Puerto Rico, including his essay *El guía de las mujeres*, which was described as “conversaciones familiares y novelas para instrucción y recreo del bello sexo” (128); and the lost novels *Magdalena* and *El Huérfano de Borínquen*. Sadly however, unless they are someday found, we will not know just how strong his advocacy for feminism could have been and is still a thematic issue that remains critically underdeveloped in the rest of his works.

Isabelita objects to the idea of marriage to Miguel because she is in love with Ricardo who is “un ilustrado joven de color” (Ramos-Perea 27). This plot and its subsequent conflict closely parallel the morality tale of *Ernesto Lefevre*. *Tío Fele* however, differs from *Ernesto Lefevre* in this regard in that instead of being articulated through class and economic differences alone, the conflict also centers on race, as Morfi notes in her brief analysis of the play.

Ya en *Ernesto Liebre*, Eleuterio Derkes había centrado el drama alrededor de la idea de que el verdadero valor del hombre reside en su talento, en sus cualidades. El protagonista logra triunfar sobre un rival rico y noble a pesar de ser pobre. En *Tío Fele* cambia la pobreza por el color negro, considerado estigma social más grave y en vez de situarla en un país extranjero, la desarrolla en Puerto Rico. (115)

While there are obvious thematic parallels between the two plays, *Tío Fele*, because of its head-on treatment of racial issues is much more than just a reiteration of *Ernesto Lefevre* on Puerto Rican soil. Up to this point, many nineteenth century authors had taken up the cause of writing about black subjects in Puerto Rico but all of these authors were white, and could not communicate the oppression and mistreatment of Afro-Puerto Ricans from anything but an outsider’s viewpoint.

Se ha dicho mucho sobre el tema del negro o de “lo negro” en la literatura puertorriqueña. Volúmenes extensos, inacabables bibliografías sobre la discusión de cómo se construye el *sujeto* del negro a través de la poesía,

la narrativa y el teatro, que enfatizan en aquellos textos que nacen de escritores blancos y su visión de lo que es el hombre o la mujer negra en el momento que observan, como si tratar de construir el *sujeto* negro desde la visión del blanco hablara algo de la visión que tiene el negro de sí mismo. (Ramos-Perea 2)

As Ramos-Perea asserts here, there is a great difference between what whites write about blacks and what blacks write about themselves. Even with the publication of Tapia's *La Cuarterona* in 1867, which is arguably the most important and most critically acclaimed nineteenth century Puerto Rican theatrical work featuring Spanish Afro-Caribbean<sup>52</sup> subjects and issues, the perspective the play gives us originates from a white point of view and relates a white story with racial issues intermingled throughout the text and is not inherently about black subjects nor does it endeavor to describe their condition and relate their experience from their point of view. With *Tío Fele* however, Derkes gives the world the first Puerto Rican theatrical work that decries racial prejudice and inequalities written by a black author, which Ramos-Perea heavily emphasizes in his analysis.

Partamos de la premisa de que esta obra es escrita, como ya sabemos, por un negro proscrito. No es la visión auto censurada de un intelectual, dramaturgo, blanco interpretando la vida del negro o mulato [. . .]. En *Tío Fele* encontramos a un *negro ilustrado* escribiendo sobre sí mismo. [. . .]

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<sup>52</sup> I use the term Afro-Caribbean here as though the setting of the play is in Cuba, it can be read that Tapia was referencing Puerto Rican society at the same time.

Pero Derkes quería desahogarse – gritar como gritan los negros – y lo hizo. *Tío Fele* es un sentido y profundo desahogo de la grave carga de años de opresión, de incompreensión, de desvelo no agradecido. Esto es su mejor acierto, pues esta obra es el primer grito de dolor contra el racismo en nuestro teatro *escrito por un negro*. (Ramos-Perea 29 *Literatura* – emphasis Ramos-Perea)

Notwithstanding Ramos-Perea's sense of over-exuberance towards his rescue and re-vindication of Derkes and his texts from over a century and a quarter of being lost, his words here in regards to *Tío Fele* are especially poignant. For the first time in Puerto Rican drama, a black author speaks out overtly against the institution of racism and its hypocrisies that were so prevalent and oppressive in the island's society in the nineteenth century. What is particularly interesting about *Tío Fele* is the variety of black characters and subjects the play broaches within its one act length; it seems that Derkes determines to attack racism on all fronts.

First, *Tío Fele* is surrounded by black characters and has a favorable attitude towards them; indeed he is their biggest advocate. In contrast, his wife Leonor is his antithesis and represents the hypocrisy exhibited by racist attitudes against the union of her daughter with Ricardo and the treatment of her grandmother, Ma Juana, who is described in the play's character list as a "morena septuagenaria" (138) and lives with Fele and Leonor. Living within the household also is the "liberto" (138) servant Cangaá, a former slave who is still

loyal to Tío Fele, but knows all too well the horrors of slavery and racist oppression. All of these characters give their own testimony of the effects of racial prejudice and the sum total of their testimonies provides not only a panorama of black lives in Puerto Rico during this time period, but also a panorama of racist attitudes through their interactions with the racist characters such as Leonor. While each character's situation can and deserves to be analyzed in greater detail, for my purposes here it is sufficient to comment briefly here only on the reactions of Fele to Leonor's racist attitudes towards Ricardo.

In Leonor's quest to prevent her daughter from marrying Ricardo and subsequently marry the lighter skinned and "passing" Miguel, as she argues with Fele, who disapproves of Miguel and would prefer that Isabel marry Ricardo, she proclaims:

Si pones en la balanza  
tu opinón, qué daño me hace  
lo que es este nuevo enlace  
sostendré a punta de lanza.  
Antes de que Isabel Dolores  
sea la esposa de Ricardo...  
¡ver en mi familia un pardo! (Derkes 141)

In the face of this overt racism, Fele is disturbed by her reasoning and refuses to be persuaded. In his response to her, he points out two salient hypocrisies that were actually common themes throughout the Caribbean in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries, but as they are used here by Derkes, prove that he was an artist ahead of his time.

Leonor, quítate de *horrores*.

Que tu cólera se aplaque:

ves que todo el mundo aprecio,

y que yo a nadie desprecio

aunque soy Don Fele *Vaque*.

Porque yo a veces supongo

que de uno en otro pariente,

quizás sea yo descendiente

de algún *mandinga* o de un *congo*.

[ . . . ]

¿Qué me importa a mí saber

quiénes fueron mis abuelos?

Vemos hoy tanta *mitura*

que si vamos a *buscar*

no es muy fácil encontrar

quien tenga la sangre pura.

[ . . . ]

A Ricardo se reputa

hombre honrado: eso es bonito:

lo demás importa un pito:

*conduta*, Leonor, *conduta*.

[. . .]

Leonor, me tienes caliente

y suelto la *escandalosa*.

[. . .]

¿Quién es la hija que te ufana?

¡La *binieta* de Ma Juana! (Derkes 141 – emphasis Derkes)

In this tirade against his wife and her racism – both latent and overt – Fele points out two critical fallacies in her logic. First, that since there has been so much racial mixing in the Caribbean already, it is often difficult and pointless for one to claim that they have “sangre pura” and are not descendants in one way or the other from an African ancestor and second, that Leonor is ignoring the fact that her own grandmother is indeed black and by hiding her and ignoring her is denying herself and Isabel their own racial heritage. Both of these themes expressed here by Derkes are ideas that were common themes in the Caribbean at the time but wouldn’t be readily expressed in published literature by black authors until the twentieth century. In two separate poems both published much later than Derkes’ works – one from Puerto Rico in the twentieth century by the negrista poet Fernando Fortunato Vizcarrondo (1896 – 1977) in 1942 and one



from the Dominican Republic by Derkes' contemporary Juan Antonio Alix (1833 – 1918) in 1927<sup>53</sup> these ideas are again repeated.

In Alix's poem "El negro tras de la oreja" – written in 1883<sup>54</sup> – the concept of miscegenation and so called "racial purity" is brought in to question by the poet as he illustrates the universality of the idea that as Fele raises when he says "quizas sea yo descendiente / de algún mandinga o de un congo".

Como hoy la preocupación  
A más de una gente abruma,  
Emplearé mi débil pluma  
Para darle una lección  
Pues esto en nuestra Nación  
Ni buen resultado deja  
Eso era en la España vieja  
Según desde chico escucho,  
Pero hoy abunda mucho  
"El negro tras de la oreja"  
[. . .]

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<sup>53</sup> While Alix lived from 1833 to 1918 his collected work of poems titled *Décimas* would not be published until after his death in 1927 as part of the Dominican *negrista* movement. Most of his poems however were written in the nineteenth century and in fact, in the 1927 version of *Décimas* it gives the date for the poem "El negro tras de la oreja" as "15 de Julio de 1833" (Alix 36), making it published roughly at the same exact time period as *Tío Fele*. Since it is unlikely that Derkes would have known of Alix, or that Alix would have ever seen a printed version of *Tío Fele*, especially in 1883 – the very year that it was published – we must assume that both ideas are products of original thought and were prevalent throughout the Caribbean as a whole. The same can be assumed for Vizcarrondo's poem as well as after the publication of *Tío Fele* in 1883 it was hardly circulated and as it was never actually produced as stage production, shortly thereafter became "lost".

<sup>54</sup> See footnote 47.

El blanco que tuvo abuela  
Tan prieta como el carbón,  
Nunca de ella hace mención  
Aunque le peguen candela.  
Ya la tía Doña Habichuela,  
Como que era blanca vieja  
De mentarla nunca deja;  
Para dar a comprender,  
Que nunca puede tener  
“El negro tras de la oreja”  
[. . .]  
El que se crea preocupado  
Que se largue allá a la Habana,  
Que en tierra dominicana  
No les dá buen resultado.  
Y el bizcochuelo lustrado  
Aunque sea con miel de abeja,  
No dé motivo de queja  
Que todo esto es tontería,  
Pues está a la moda hoy día  
“El negro tras de la oreja” (Morales 203)

This same sentiment is echoed again in Vizcarrondo's poem, but later in the twentieth century and matches with Fele's challenge to Leonor her hiding and pretended ignorance of Ma Juana.

Ayé mi dijite negro

Y hoy te boy a contejtá:

Mi mai se sienta en la sala,

¿Y tu agüela, a'onde ejtá?

[. . .]

Como tu nena ej blanquita

La sácaj mucho a pasiá...

Y yo con gana 'e grítate

¿Y tu agüela, a'onde ejtá?

[. . .]

Ayé mi dijite negro

Queriéndome abochojná

Mi agüela sale a la sala

Y la tuya oculta ejtá.

[. . .]

¡Y bien que yo la conojco!

Se ñama siña Tatá...

Tú la ejconde en la cosina

Pocque ej prieta de a beldá. (57)

In these poems both Alix and Vizcarrondo express a consciousness of thought about race and racial issues that were just coming into vogue at the height of Vizcarrondo's career. And while for him the *negrista* movement ensured a solid footing and receptive audience to which his poetic discourse could flow, the same can not necessarily be said for Alix and Derkes. Although talking about this issues alone through poetry represents a pioneering spirit and forward thinking, for Alix however, raising this question in 1883 in the Dominican Republic didn't pose the same risks as it did for Derkes in 1883 in Puerto Rico. Even though slavery had been abolished for nearly ten years, the Spanish colonial authority would still hold tight fisted control over all political matters for another fifteen years and institutionalized and social racism were as strong as ever (Ramos-Perea 29).

For Derkes, the publication of *Tío Fele* represented perhaps his greatest risk as an artist; he was finally attacking in open combat the forces of oppression that had held him down for his entire life. Once hidden and subtle, his *hacendado* counter-discourse now could become everything he had ever envisioned it could be, and he wasn't holding back, nor hiding his color through romantic aesthetics and adherence to the *hacendado* discourse. While still mimicking this discourse, his texts now represented an even bigger ambiguity or slippage in the discourse that allowed him to breach subjects that others would not begin to address for another quarter century and reminded the public that while his works appeared to

be “white”, they were almost, but not quite, and that he himself would not turn white, nor disappear.

While he never received any financial gain from the publication of *Tío Fele* its completion alone marked a great personal achievement; a private personal success that may have emboldened and prompted him to publish it alongside the cleverly satirical and humorous poem *La Macabiada*, a clear and direct attack on the man who closed his school and subjected him and his family to abject poverty and suffering for the last years of his life, Lieutenant General Don José Laureano Sanz.

While we don’t know much about this lost work, as it has yet to be found and analyzed, we do know that it was a satirical work fashioned after Tapia’s *La Sataniada* (1874) consisting of six cantos in which Derkes ridiculed Sanz and his time as governor in Puerto Rico. As Vicente Palés records, this represented Derkes’ ultimate vengeance against the despotic Lieutenant General and governor of Puerto Rico.

¡Injusticia por injusticia, puntapié por puntapié, preferimos lo de antes y hasta estamos por envidiar la suerte de Derkes, que al menos pudo vengarse, odiando al tirano que lo maltrató y ridiculizándolo en *La Macabiada*; bien a diferencia de nosotros los profesores de ahora, que no podemos odiar ni ridiculizar, sino seguir amando a nuestros gratuitos enemigos! (237).

Perhaps, however, this vengeance would prove to be too much as the loss of *La Macabiada* is an extremely telling example of just how strong and deeply rooted colonial fears of blacks and racism were in Puerto Rico and brings to question just who received the ultimate vengeance with its publication. Perhaps Derkes, who had now taken off his white mask, was once again effaced and relegated to obscurity through the ignorance and loss of his texts by the structures of racial and classist power of the Island for over a century and a quarter. Notwithstanding this final effacement, the importance of Derkes contributions as a pioneering Puerto Rican writer cannot be under-emphasized and can no longer be ignored. Not only was he the first black writer in Puerto Rico, he was one of the first black writers in the Caribbean who dared attack the predominant literary structures of the time through strict adherence to their aesthetic and thematic codes by creating a discourse that mirrored that hegemonic reality but was counter to it at the same time. Indeed through his poetry, drama and prose he created a discourse that relates the unique perspective of one who has lived and suffered through the rigors of life in an economic system centered on the plantation and totally dependent on sugar production. While in his works, the image of the plantation is replaced by the *hacienda* and trappings of a more urban society moving towards and finally experiencing the change to a society not dependent on slave labor he creates a discourse that is still relevant today and thanks to the efforts of Ramos-Perea – who has spent the better part of his career patiently searching for Derkes and his lost texts and the many others who in the future will

continue to write and think critically about his work and its consequences – ensures its permanence and endurance on the landscape of literature and literary criticism for generations to come.

## **Conclusion: From the Plantation to the Future – Towards a Greater Understanding of Caribbean Discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

It is through the effort to recapture the self and scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world. [. . .] At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness. My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions! – Frantz Fanon

When Antonio Benítez-Rojo asked us, as critics of Latin American and Caribbean literature, to be realists and proclaimed that “el Atlántico es hoy el Atlántico [. . .] porque alguna vez fue producto de la cópula de Europa [. . .] con las costas del Caribe; [. . .] porque Europa, en su laboratorio mercantilista, concibió el proyecto de inseminar la matriz caribeña con la sangre de África” (*La isla que se repite* vi) he concisely described the conception, history, reality and future of the Caribbean in one statement. With all its implications of colonialism, tyranny, racism, slavery and oppression this was the reality of Juan Francisco Manzano, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido), Eleuterio Derkes and countless other authors and individuals whose situations and stories have yet to come to light. In this dissertation I have endeavored to show how these four authors navigated and related this reality through sustained literary discourses expressed through the mediums of the novel, narrative, poetry, and drama. In the case of each author, for a variety of reasons, their work first had to conform to the various controlling discourses already functioning in Cuba and Puerto Rico at the time. As such, their works heavily bear the marks of these structures,



originally derived from European constructs and literary tradition and has caused their works to be largely misunderstood and misappropriated by both their contemporaries and modern critics. My work here is an attempt to analyze these works within the context of the time period of the text and authors themselves, to understand how the authors viewed themselves both as colonial Caribbean subjects and authorial agents within the confines of a colonial system dominated by a plantation economy. They lived difficult lives that produced rich stories and understandings that could not often be told overtly for fear of oppression or reprisal. Instead, they had to fashion their texts in such a way as to disguise their commentaries and criticisms behind the guise of the very hegemony they were railing against. They had to use to learn this hegemony against itself, mimic its realities and write what their consciences dictated, and were successful in doing so.

With *Autobiografía*, *Versos*, and *Zafira* Manzano paints “the most perfect picture of slavery” in the Spanish Caribbean that has withstood the barriers of time and oppression despite the loss of the second half of *Autobiografía*. His autobiographical narrative, poetry and drama relate the “ciclo fatal de la plantación” and the conditions of slave life through the slave’s own perspective. Though he did finally succumb to the pressures of life in a plantation economy and prematurely stopped writing, his texts do remain as a loud and furious cry against slavery, racism and colonial oppression. With his poetry, Plácido was able to relate the difficulties of nineteenth century Cuban life as a free person of

color and created a discourse of resistance and revolution that when analyzed closely enough and understood through his unique perspective, could not be silenced neither by hegemonic pressures nor his own martyrdom. Finally, with his poetry and drama, Eleuterio Derkes became the first black writer in Puerto Rico to address racial and class issues on the island controlled by the *hacendado* class. He used his works to create a discourse that raged against these structures of power and proclaimed a new era that sadly, his world wasn't quite ready to receive. Though his texts have remained silent and hidden from view for more than a century and a quarter, his legacy did not die with him and now the world has its chance to hear his unique Caribbean voice in the fullness of its force.

From here, the possibilities for these authors and their works are limitless. As the world of literature and literary criticism begins to re-evaluate these texts in the light of new critical approaches and a broader understanding of nineteenth century Caribbean life, their preeminence as “molding” and “modeling” texts for present and future discourses can readily be seen and established. The more we study and learn about the lives and works of authors and artists such as Avellaneda, Manzano, Plácido and Derkes, the more we are able to understand ourselves and the pressures our own hegemonic tendencies inflict on developing and marginalized writers and discourses and the better we are able to empower them as authorial agents and ensure their success without further marginalization. This is our responsibility and the legacy left us by these four

authors. The price they all paid to be called a writer demands that we give more attention not only to their texts, but to those texts of writers just like them as well.

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## Vita

Garrett Alan Oleen was born in Vernal, Utah on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1972 to Alan Whiting Oleen and Marsha Phillips. Upon Graduating from Uintah High School, Vernal, Utah in 1991 he received a B.A. in Languages with an Emphasis in Spanish from Southern Utah University in 1997. From there he moved to Salt Lake City, Utah where he received an M.A. in Hispanic Literature from the University of Utah in 2002. Immediately upon completion of his M.A. he moved to Round Rock, Texas and began to pursue his Ph.D. in Hispanic Literature at the University of Texas at Austin. In September, 1995 he married Deanna Gilger in St. George, Utah. They have three children; Kayson Garrett, Bailey De, and Tyler Austin Oleen.

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